Taking Stock: Chad Ress's Photographs of the Recovery Act

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Considering Chad Ress's photographs of sites affected by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), one is struck by contrasting observations: the unassuming neutrality of these images on the one hand, and their potentially provocative political implications on the other. Between the two, Ress's position is not immediately apparent. Does he, as he claims himself, successfully "avoid" revealing his own ideological stance or does his visual language rather present a commentary on this embattled government? Is Ress a critic or an accomplice in ARRA efforts? And how does his own project relate to his hope for proper communication about ARRA policy through stock photography? In a text for *TIME* magazine, Ress explains that he had found different types of data on the government website that documented ARRA projects. In some cases, images were crowdsourced and what "appears to be stock imagery." He speculates whether representing ARRA projects this way "ultimately result[s] in a more accurate, transparent, or historical document" that will be "up to the task of remembering this very important policy."[1] This essay attempts to situate Ress's photographs both as part of a large endeavor of "taking stock" of government measures and the tradition of surveying and organizing visual data in large sets of images; it also situates Ress's work as part of a complex history of photography in dialog with artistic and documentary practices.

The following description of the relation between a photograph's referent and a viewer's options for its further interpretation by the photographer Jeff Wall provides a point of departure for thinking through this issue based on a consideration of the "still" photographic image as an astonishingly nimble medium:

> The still picture is the most free visual form, it invites the most free experience. Since it shows only an isolated moment, it cannot and must not show other moments, it can only suggest them. We take the suggestion, and elaborate it ourselves, freely, or very freely, according to who each viewer is, or wishes to be.[2]

Wall's observation suggests the collaborative production of meaning between the photographer, the viewer and the moment. The "still picture" relies on interpretation in order to uncover its entire range of meanings. This is particularly true for Ress's images of recovery projects. They seem to express and combine a number of different agendas. One aims directly at representing the matter-of-fact descriptive text of the projects provided by recovery.gov; the other follows a more interpretive path. Together these approaches, and the fact that they are deliberately left undistinguished, complicates Ress's work. It aligns it with both creative and conceptual modes of representation. This multiplicity of approaches figures directly into the images' form, which appears both documentary, striving to represent accurately and objectively, and fictional, "elaborating" on the subject matter.

Ress himself describes his intentions in a way that supports both the generative side of photography and its use to create an archive of knowledge. He explains that he considers many parameters including "perceived aesthetic opportunity," his initial response to the content of the language, and his desire to create a "representative sampling of the broader stimulus efforts."[3] His photographs challenge their viewers by highlighting a space of interpretive uncertainty. The image remains suspended—undecided—and unfolds meaning that is particularly open to different interpretations.

In his observations about the process of seeing photographs, the American philosopher Kendall Walton touches on this issue:

> We have now uncovered a major source of the confusion which infects writings about photography and film: failure to recognize and distinguish clearly between the special kind of seeing which actually occurs and the ordinary kind of seeing which only fictionally takes place, between a viewer's really seeing something through a photograph and his fictionally seeing something directly. A vague awareness of both, stirred together in a witches' cauldron, could conceivably tempt one toward the absurdity that the viewer is really in the presence of the object.[4]

For Walton, fictionalization happens in the process of seeing. "Fictional seeing" suggests seeing the actual thing in the photographs while one really only sees a representation.[5] Walton finds that fiction happens in the process of seeing an image—the photograph "owns" a "remarkable ability to put us in perceptual contact with the world," something he calls "photography's transparency" and which he declares the most important justification for speaking of "photographic realism."[6] Transparency and fiction are related to one another when regarding photographs not as autonomous but as activated and rendered meaningful in the process of their being seen, interpreted, and contextualized.

With their straightforward aesthetic, Ress's thirty-eight color images of ARRA projects sites, objects, and people suggest a reliably "real" plot just as they inspire something fictitious. It is this asynchronism between transparency (the "suggestion" of

making things appear) and fiction (the application of imagination and interpretation) that Jeff Wall hints at when he talks about photography as the process of "elaborating" on the suggestions which any given moment provides.

Ress's images correspond with descriptive captions; the artist adopted the text verbatim from the ARRA website and used it as instructions for image making. Text and image, while clearly related and referential, tell two different stories. Ress, unsurprisingly, decided for their display in this book that they be clearly separated from one another; one spread contains the caption, the next the image.[7] This dissociation between text and image is rendered even more profound through photographic means. The images' documentary character seems to underwrite ARRA's explicit call for transparency; while Ress's choice of subject, such as inclusion of people or the depiction of a site that might have been chosen to correspond most closely to a caption without being able to exactly identify its location, places these photographs into the realm of fiction.[8]

The scope of Ress's images is determined by the range of projects that were financed by the Obama administration's 2009 ARRA stimulus bill. The website, recovery.gov, was set up as part of ARRA's requirement "to establish and maintain a user-friendly, public-facing website to foster greater accountability and transparency in the use of covered funds."[9] To this end the administration established recovery.gov as a resource by which the public might track expenditures. Ress used the same tool as starting point for conceptualizing his images.[10] Recognizing this unique opportunity and inspired by "the disconnects—between text and image—between paying your taxes and how those funds are spent," Ress used the project descriptions not only as a guide to ARRA projects, but as a kind of suggestive script or instruction.[11] These seem to be images, then, that take into account elements of these descriptions and yet don't reveal unequivocally what this-or-that measure achieved or how it was instated. "Elaborating" on these photographs, the viewer is confronted with multiple meanings.

Part of this polyphony—these layers of pictorial meaning and the tension between transparency and fiction—is created in the ambiguity of pictorial form as well as in the space that Ress describes as "disconnects" between text and image. One way of accessing this space is to take clues from an artistic practice that routinely relies on textual and visual means, and that trades languages of description and interpretation: instructional art. This approach originates in the practice of conceptual artists in the 1960s. Sol LeWitt, an early proponent of instructional art, famously provided instructions for artwork such as line drawings, which were to be applied directly onto gallery or museum walls and which took several people multiple days to execute.[12] Claiming that, "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art," LeWitt prioritized idea, concept, and instruction over its manifestation, and thus confronted the instructional text with many potential interpretations.[13] Seemingly transparent, clearly decipherable instruction renders its artistic execution the subject to interpretation—to fictionalization.[14]

Not surprisingly, others from the Fluxus Movement in the 1960s and 70s to more contemporary artists such as Andrea Fraser or Erwin Wurm, have understood instruction more as a guideline for enactment than for creation. However, unlike conceptual art, which is concerned with instruction only insofar as it serves to realize the idea, Ress's work is deeply committed to both image form and content. In other words, Ress's work's *content* is based on the website's instruction,

while its form, i.e., its composition and framing are determined by his aesthetic decisions and interpretations.

In this respect Ress's project relates to modernist discussions of photography as a means to capture instantaneously, but also to Jeff Wall's understanding of the still image as suggestive medium. Wall, a photographer who has significantly shaped post-modern theories of photographic representation, is known to use compositional strategies that rely on historic conventions. Both Ress and Wall speak about their subject matter through precise staging. Ress seems to combine different traits of postmodern artistic production: the reliance on rules or signals that submit the creative process to a certain degree of chance and unpredictability as well as the sophisticated determination of an image's content through editorial measures such as framing. Part of this instruction-based creative process resonates with Ress' idea to have captions on their own page, apart from the photo, almost as distinct and independent works of art.

Ress's image of New Hogan Lake presents a somewhat puzzling scenario. As if following a hidden choreography, a hydraulic shovel is distributing large boulders in piles on an open, brown grass-covered plain. The monumental dimensions of the boulders and the diagonal they trace recall ritualistic sites of ancient cultures, only these rocks are clearly being arranged by industrial means. This ambiguity is countered by the image's sophisticated composition. Horizontally divided into two almost perfect halves—of brown earthy bottom and airy blue-white top—the light blue band of a creek and a few dark green bushes on the far right trace the image's dividing horizon line. A clear compositional sensitivity is detectable in the hydraulic shovel's marking of the image's vertical golden ratio on the left; while the clustered boulders trace a diagonal line connecting the machine's dramatic arm and shovel on the center-left with the picture's foreground, slightly to the right. This image is not a landscape photograph in the classic sense (Ansel Adams comes to mind), nor is it a landscape image in the style of scientific surveys (such as Carleton Watkins's or William Henry Jackson's). Looking for clues and consulting the caption (the instructions), suggests that this is "New Hogan Lake, Valley Springs, California." The task depicted, according to Ress quoting recovery.gov, is to "place boulders in Wrinkle Cove and Whiskey Creek Recreation Areas." It promises "boulders will be used to prevent illegal off-road travel during low lake levels and prevent environmental degradation." The work is being funded through the Recovery Act with $125,000.00.[15]

But what of this instruction has actually figured into this image and what does one's interpretive "elaboration" add to it? This image, as the others in this set, points to Ress's own struggle with the interpretation and systematic organization of the subject of *recovery*. He points out that despite the mandate for transparency, "There are certain aspects of the stimulus bill that seem impossibly opaque to me. I've been limited in the sites I'm allowed to visit and these limitations have become very important. So what you're not seeing here is perhaps as interesting as what you are seeing."[16] Ress's narrative, his fiction, emerges from an interplay between the mundane, descriptive instructions and his attempt at capturing the things that cannot be made visible, by filtering them through the panoramic landscape genre. The work reveals a certain cognitive dissonance between the verbal narrative's plain language and its visual translations' unavoidable transformation of the subject into a highly individual image. Given the same caption, any other artist would produce a different image

Chad Ress, New Hogan Lake Valley Springs, California, 2009.

and would employ his or her creative imagination in different ways. ARRA's transparency is anything but.

As Bonnie Honig remarks in her foreword, photographic predecessors and influences help put this work into perspective. Roy Stryker, leading protagonist of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), had a documentary vision aimed at representing the overcoming of hardship and of completing public works.[17] FSA photographers, such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, are known to have been instructed by Stryker to create an engaging photographic narrative, to follow a "shooting script," or "a brief but carefully worked out story of what is to be presented."[18] Compared to such a script, for Ress the ARRA captions set a more open agenda, leaving leeway in his determination of the images' form and content. It is not surprising then that Ress takes clues less from Evans and Lange, the two most prominent FSA photographers, but rather from photographers who started their careers during the late 60s and early 70s and who emerged as photographic representation became associated with post-modern questions of authenticity and authorship. Such photographers include Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, Stephen Shore, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. They shared an interest in the mundane everyday qualities of American life. Their work was brought to a larger audience's attention with two exhibitions, *Towards a Social Landscape* (1966), and the even more influential *New Topographics* (1975). The latter was organized by William Jenkins who identified a shared concern amongst these predominantly American photographers for the damaging impact of human intervention on the American landscape. The exhibition displayed—in 168 carefully composed, mostly black-and-white prints of streets, warehouses, city centers, and industrial and suburban sites—different interpretations of America's "man-altered landscape." This work carried a political message and reflected, consciously or not, "the growing unease about how the natural landscape was being eroded by industrial development and the spread of cities."[19]

It was during the 1960s and 70s, when the American landscape was receiving such interest, that photography became the medium of choice for *artists* appreciating its particular qualities of speed and suitability to be compared, contrasted and arranged according to typologies of motifs. Jeff Wall's hybrid images, bearing both documentary and fictional characteristics, belong to this category, as do those of Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and the Bechers. Wall's large color prints or transparencies (often displayed in light boxes) depict seemingly quotidian yet almost undetectably staged situations. This hybrid work has famously been called "near documentary." It describes pictures that may be reconstructions of events that he witnessed or that may be documentary photographs involving a small degree of intervention by the artist.[20] Such a conflation of observation and creative intervention appears in other artistic scenarios as a result of instructional art or curatorial approaches.[21] What Ress's images share with Wall's and those by his contemporaries is a desire to make transparent what a place looks like while enhancing and amplifying such transparency through the deliberate framing and setting up of a scene. However, transparency, when dramatized, becomes unreal.

In the photograph titled *Rose Creek Bike and Pedestrian Bridge, San Diego, California*, Ress places the viewer underneath two broad concrete column–supported highways, which diverge into the frame's left and right upper corners. Close to

the photographer's standpoint in the image's middle ground, a chain link fence cuts horizontally. This composition highlights a sense of the site's inhospitality. The early afternoon sun produces two bold diagonal shadows off both concrete tracks. Cutting through the image plane from the lower left to the upper right these shadows starkly define the photograph's middle ground. Such a high degree of compositional rigor instills a certainty about the image subject, which is revoked once one realizes that the image and its instructions—a "bike/pedestrian bridge to connect with the existing bike path and to provide access cross Rose Creek"—don't seem to match at all. This image does not actually depict the caption's content, but rather a situation that makes the need for such a bridge palpable. The Mike Gotch Memorial Bike and Pedestrian Bridge was actually built in April of 2012 a couple of miles south of the site that Ress photographed. Reports about the opening, which enthusiastically praised its connection of crucial parts of the San Diego bike lane system, made no mention of the fact that its completion was enabled by ARRA. The reports did mention, however, that this project (as is typical for most of those funded by ARRA) had been years in the making but had lacked funding to be completed.[22]

The image's aesthetic and iconography, especially when considered alongside the reports' omission of the funding source, contrast sharply with New Deal image program. Neither the matter-of-fact language of the WPA's survey photography nor the FSA 's highly choreographed documentation of the living circumstances of poor farmers and sharecroppers would reasonably have worked if they were as ambiguous as Ress's. The WPA photo surveyor's approach favored depicting unequivocal situations or stages of projects by either presenting people at work, or by showing the work progression, or the completed infrastructural or building project. One of many examples is the WPA-sponsored work for the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.[23] The black-and-white photograph on the following page depicts the construction process of the Lyon Street approach to the bridge.[24] Stemming from a large survey and documentary project, this photograph (and many others like it) brings with it the rich context of systematically assembled and state funded collections, which also distinguishes it from Ress's private initiative.

Another instructional example to discuss formal and content-related decisions in conjunction with the Rose Creek Bridge is Robert Adams's 1974 photo book *The New West*. It was among the first explicit and unapologetic commentaries on American suburbia that had begun to dominate the US American landscape since the end of World War II. His photographs of interstate Highway 25 and Mount Vernon Canyon are typically deadpan (see page 41). Highly abstracted and geometrically composed, both photographs capture views onto highways by using the railing separating the street from the surrounding desert landscape as horizontal structuring elements. These photographs' stark, black and white contrasts, together with their square format, condense and amplify the prosaic subject matter with a convincing directness. In his foreword to *The New West*, John Szarkowski described Adams's photographs as "so civilized, temperate, and exact, eschewing hyperbole, theatrical gestures, moral postures, and *espressivo* effects generally, that some viewers might find them dull."[24] However, this seeming lack of theatricality does not preclude Adams's capacity for dramatization, which he achieves through extreme abstraction. Ress's Rose Creek Bike/Pedestrian Bridge adopts a similar kind of attention to geometry, civility, containment, and aesthetic candor, yet he reintroduces

Chad Ress, Rose Creek Bike/Pedestrian Bridge,
San Diego, California, 2009 .

View of WPA crews at work on the Lyon Street approach to the Golden Gate Bridge, May 24, 1937. Photographer unknown, Work Projects Administration, San Francisco, California.

Robert Adams, Along Interstate 25, 1974.

Robert Adams, Mount Vernon Canyon, 1974.

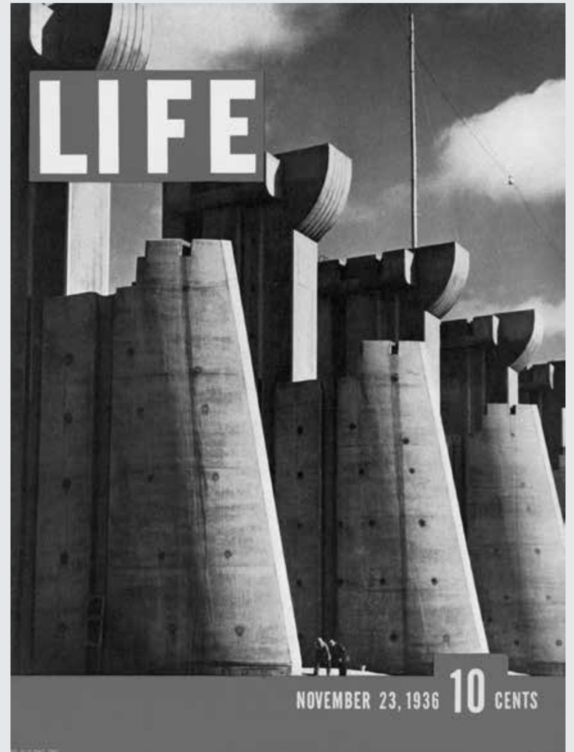
a playful dynamic and narrative of sorts through color, and composition. Jeff Wall, in contrast, working in his mode of documentation went much further to control his image compositions and narrative.[25] Art journalist Arthur Lubow tells the fascinating story of Wall meticulously reconstructing a site in a studio, a "club exterior—the columns and grille-work of the facade, the gum-spotted sidewalk, the concrete curb," when it had turned out that it was too heavily trafficked and therefore not accessible with his large-format camera.[26] Compared to this approach, Ress and Adams appear almost casual and open to happenstance.

The documentary language of Ress's Fullerton Dam image is countered by his compositional choices. Featuring browns and grays, concrete, dry and leafless plants upon a gray sky, its central element is an almost Palladian linear symmetrical concrete structure divided by the vertical dam's tower in two perfect halves. To each side of the tower, concrete enforcements block a stream of debris or boulders from rolling down the hill. A water puddle has formed at the bottom center of the image in front of the tower, collecting all kinds of detritus. A coarse metal grid covers the front length of the tower and makes it look like a part of a fortress. This composition evokes symmetries of Renaissance stage sets. The "instruction" is full of action items such as "construct log boom" or "keep debris from reaching the intake tower," but it distills into an even more abstracted image than that of the bike path in San Diego. The transparency of this project's choreography is rendered opaque through interpretive measures that borrow both from conceptual approaches and a deep knowledge of the language of western art.

Fullerton Dam is part of the Fullerton Reservoir on East Fullerton Creek in Orange County, California. It was built in 1941 for the US Army Corps of Engineers and measures 46 feet high and 575 feet long. While Ress's picture focuses on the dominating architectural structure of the dam tower, it neither gives a sense of the site's dimensions nor of the location for the log boom. The website of Lucille Roybal-Allard, the congresswoman for California's 40th Congressional District, reveals that "the stimulus money" was allotted to fund an array of additional measures beyond a log boom. For example, it was used to remove "graffiti along channels and tributaries of the river, clear non-native vegetation in the soft bottom areas of the river in the Glendale Narrows area, replace and maintain channel fencing along Compton Creek"; and remove "vegetation… on Corps dams."[27] Such additional knowledge reveals Ress's deliberate reductive choice of image subject. It yet again amplifies the cognitive dissonance when trying to align the captions with their images. Considering Ress's reductionism, it is instructive to compare his image of a dam to Margaret Bourke-White's iconic New Deal image of the Fork Peck dam and its history.

Henry Luce of *LIFE* magazine assigned the documentation of the erection of Fort Peck Dam at the Missouri River in Montana to Bourke-White (1904-1971) in 1936. Her most iconic image of that series was called "Fort Peck Dam, Montana," and its cropped version was famously featured on the inaugural cover of *LIFE* magazine in 1936. Here, just like in Ress's image, but unlike the functional and anonymous photo-documentations of the WPA, the motif and its caption don't exactly align. This is not the dam but the dam's spillway and the piers of an unfinished elevated highway. This was located some three miles from the actual dam and was completed four years later in 1940. Bourke-White made savvy use of this colossal concrete structure, which unfolded

Chad Ress, Fullerton Dam, Fullerton, California, 2009.



LIFE magazine, issue one, November 23, 1936. Cover photo of the Fort Peck Dam by Margaret Bourke-White.

its dramatic effect most impressively in its incomplete state. Once the highway was built, these floodgates lost their magic semblance to battlements and looked more like any other industrial concrete structure. It is today widely recognized that this image "solidified Fort Peck Dam's status as an icon of the machine age" and that Bourke-White created "a vivid illustration of the power of technology to dwarf humankind."[28] Jordan Carver, in his text in this volume, speaks of an "infrastructural sublime" that links the "vast scale of infrastructural development with the governing power of the state as the only feasible institution that could successfully accomplish such feats." Chad Ress's image of Fullerton Dam, which similarly leaves questions about proportions and work quality unanswered and keeps the project's essential tasks ambiguous, proves a sense for compositional priorities equal to Bourke-White. However, his image doesn't speak of an industrial achievement of aesthetics, technology, and civilization but rather of obsolescence and its corresponding sublime. Examining Ress's image, one starts questioning those very achievements and their significance today.

Bourke-White had been sent out to document this massive building project with the assumption that she would use the camera as a documentary tool. And indeed, her photographs would become what turned out to be the first photo reportage of many published by *LIFE*. This episodic and narrative use of photography became the lingua franca of photojournalism and publishing for the next forty years. The black-and-white photographs by Bourke-White's generation of photographers (Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Gerta Taro, and others) formed the public image of wars, famines, and economic development across the globe for viewers in Europe and North America well into the 1970s. Bourke-White's photograph, however, superseded mere documentation. It facilitated most favorable "elaboration" by its mass audience on the subject of New Deal Projects. *LIFE* editors expressed their awe at Bourke-White's approach, pointing out that instead of getting the documentation of a building they got "a human document of American frontier life instead, which, to them at least, was a revelation."[29] Bourke-White's affirmative and humanistic pictorial vocabulary corresponded with a growing hunger to witness events and conflicts as well as the rapid emergence of photojournalism more generally.

Ress's Fullerton Dam, in comparison, speaks a very different language. A kind of post-industrial fatigue sets in, and the erosion of infrastructure in an age of combatted governmental influence becomes apparent. Ress's refusal to show the actual stimulus measure at the Fullerton Dam underlines this intention. His enigmatic photograph alienates its subject, rendering the dam a symbol of slow decay, disrepair, and neglect. Ress seems uninterested in cropping or staging the dam—as a New Deal agenda might have prescribed—but he chooses to omit the achievements of the dam project's retrofitting by visiting the site before any action took place and by obscuring the dam tower's activity and function. What we as viewers apprehend is therefore the decline of the sense of "the power of technology to dwarf humankind" instilled by Bourke-White almost eighty years earlier.

While the majority of Ress's images are unpopulated landscapes or cityscapes, he sometimes includes or even foregrounds people in his photographs. This approach is mostly used when ARRA funding is supplied to provide public institutions, such as museums, prisons, libraries, or archives, with salaries for employees or equipment for occupants and

users. Sitters are never identified by name and instead appear as signifiers of the impact of funding on people's lives. These are not portraits in the conventional sense but rather images of people supported by ARRA funding or—still—left in perilous social and economic circumstances by the recession. Ress's presentation of human protagonists is never coincidental and often appears overtly staged.

In the image accompanying the caption "Boysville of Michigan," a girl is seated at a small desk facing an empty wall. She is positioned slightly off the image's center to the left. The tidy yet somewhat shabby room's nondescript carpet and turquoise and eggshell–colored wall suggest an institutional setting. The wall is lined, at about one third of its height from the ground, by a brown, wooden band and a horizontal strip of electric outlets. This division's location coincides with the height of the seated girl's head. Her concentrated body language is contrasted by her casual outfit—she wears a white hooded sweatshirt, gray sweatpants, and pink fake-fur slippers. Ress chose to capture her facing the wall, which contradicts the human impulse to assess a room by looking inward. This odd scene triggers more questions than it answers.

Boysville of Michigan was founded in 1948. Initially a boarding school for Catholic boys deemed troubled, this program was built on land previously owned by Henry Ford. In a 2014 article announcing the closing of Boysville's Macon campus, the *Tecumseh Herald* explained that the expansion of children's services for Holy Cross Children's Services [formerly Boysville of Michigan] included a whole array of public service institutions such as "other residential campuses, group homes, charter schools, foster care homes, supervised independent living programs, day treatment, and other services" across the state of Michigan.[30] The girl, Ress's photograph seems to suggest, might then be part of a program for youth that was supposed to benefit from ARRA funding. Perhaps the closing of the Macon campus could have been prevented, or it is the result of a post-ARRA impact consolidation of sites and support for children and youth in need. As in his other images, the scope of the funding measure and its exact location is not addressed. Most likely, it was not known to Ress and, more importantly, was not central to his pursuit. What is made very clear by the captions, however, is the amount of funding the government provided for this initiative.

This is a touching portrait, even if the girl's face is not visible. Seated facing the wall, she appears vulnerable, seen without seeing, seemingly unaware that she's being photographed. The domestic and the public interact somewhat awkwardly here, which adds to a sense that the girl's circumstances are uncertain and temporary. The humanity of this image's motif and the dollar amount of its caption make for an ambiguous pair.

Uncertainty on a collective scale was the subject of Dorothea Lange's documentation of unemployed and impoverished Californians in her work for Roy Stryker's FSA effort. The breadth of her photographic vocabulary ranged from scenes observed on the street, which were probably captured in instantaneous single images, to her famously edited image series. Her published images were the product of careful selection and cropping, such as her well-known "Migrant Mother." Lange's protagonist in a different photograph titled "Man beside a Wheelbarrow" taken in San Francisco in 1934 remains anonymous, just like Ress's girl. His head bent forward, the wheelbarrow next to him turned upside-down, this scene speaks of despair and resignation.

The girl in Ress's photograph joins the chorus of Americans

Chad Ress, Boysville Of Michigan, Detroit, Michigan, 2010.

Dorothea Lange, Man Beside Wheelbarrow, 1934.

that have been affected by the recession and that benefit from government measures. While Lange's and Evans's photographs captured the challenging, often devastating circumstances of the Depression, with the understanding of creating an image of a nation in recovery from hardship, Ress's photographs that include people seem more toned down and to avoid generalizing claims about the situation of children and youth in disciplinary institutions, for example. As usual and typical for a post-conceptual artist, he seems to count on the viewer's interpretation and speculation instead of guiding the reading of this image. This lack of resolve is deliberate.

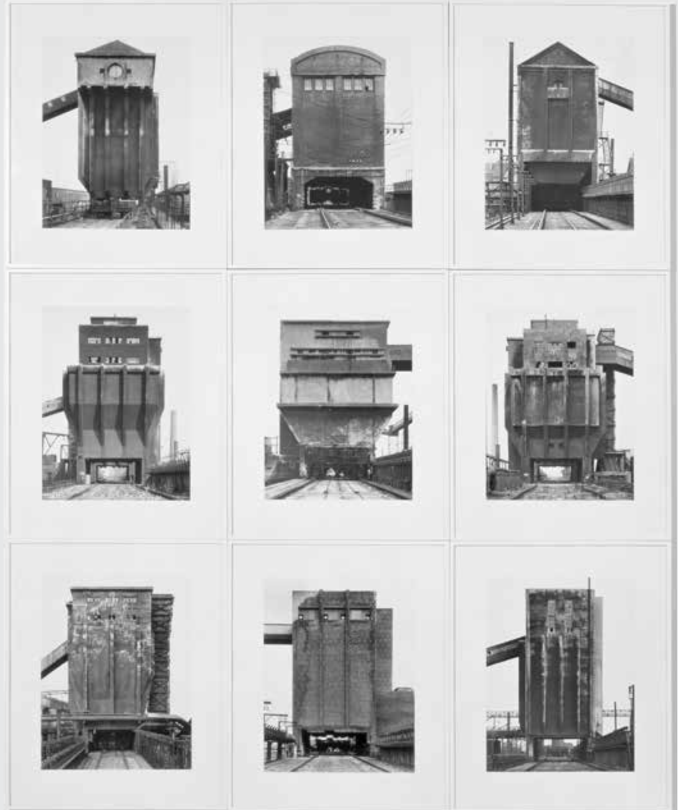
Lange's images can be grouped in two distinct categories: the vast majority are preserved on contact sheets and stored out of sight in archives; a handful of her photographs have come to serve as iconic symbols of despair and resilience. Ress's body of work, even though he stated his aim of creating "a representative sample" of recovery projects, remains much smaller and never aspired to or carried the charge of having been commissioned for such a monumental task.[31]

Another of Ress's images attests to this modesty and aesthetic containment. The photograph of a simple sheet metal shelter shows a metal roofed structure of four posts. Some of the roof's cladding has fallen off. The hut, placed right in the image center, was erected on a sandy shore, which looks like part of an artificial landscape. The elementary quality of this image resonates with the artificiality of the image's subject, the unrealness of earth itself. The band of water in the image's middle ground seems to have gathered as a result of mining or the construction of a dam. According to the ARRA-provided caption, the hut is located in the New Mexican high desert at Cochiti Lake. Cochiti Dam was authorized under the Flood Control Act of 1960, which was further amended in 1964 to allocate water resources for the development of fish, wildlife, and recreational resources. 62,000,000 cubic meters of water was gathered under this amendment for initial pool fill and sufficient resources were provided to offset annual evaporation losses. Ress's photograph shows a fragment of this recreational area, which appears to have fallen into disrepair.[32] Devoid of people, Ress's scene does not acknowledge the fact that this is a recreational site at all, a place for leisure and enjoyment. Instead it looks like a post-apocalyptic landscape.

The Cochiti Lake image recalls the Bechers' work, in which single images of the same type of building are set up in typological matrices. Always photographed under an overcast sky, the individual structure and its site are rendered flat, shadowless, secondary to the meaning of verisimilitude, repetition, and the potential monotony of industrial reproduction. Ress's primal hut stands on its own but joins another typology, one that tries to match material culture and production with the politics of recovery and financial relief efforts. This formal resemblance of Ress's work to the Bechers's, triggers, yet again associations with two *New Topographics* artists, Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz.

The critic Sean O'Hagan related their work to Walker Evans's for the FSA adding another facet to the way in which we can read Ress's photographs. O'Hagan detected an oblique nod in the *New Topographics* show toward the late work of Walker Evans, who had "photographed the vernacular iconography of American road signs, billboards, motel and shop signs." But while Evans' photographs for today's observer "carry the romantic undertow of an almost vanished America", the *New Topographics* photographs focused on the utterly unromantic [then] here and now. John Szarkowski's observations about *New Topographics* participant Robert Adams's work

Chad Ress, Cochiti Lake, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2010.



Bernd and Hilla Becher, Coal Bunkers, 1966–1999.

Lewis Baltz, South Corner, Riccar America, 3184 Pullman, Costa Mesa, The New Industrial Parks, near Irvine, California, 1974

summed up this particular understanding when he pointed out that Adams had "discovered in these dumb and artless agglomerations of boring buildings the suggestion of redeeming virtue. He has made them look not beautiful but important, as the relics of an ancient civilization look important. He has even made them look, in an uninspiring way, natural."[33] Similarly, Ress's choice of unassuming subjects and sites that barely seem to even relate to ARRA works render his subject matter important and present it in a way that contradicts a viewer's expectations. By choosing sites of varying elusiveness, he assigns them significance.

Ress navigates the complex field of contemporary photography with an awareness of its rich heritage. While contending with and liberally following the instruction of the information of ARRA provided captions, he admits to second guessing his attempt at disregarding his own ideological bias.[34] He knows that such intention is most likely impossible to achieve. Ress, like Wall or even the nineteenth century photographic explorers of the American West, cannot avoid revealing his own intentions and biases. Ress's intention to create a representative sampling, an overview of ARRA sites suggest his hope for an almost quantifiable, quasi-scientific output. Predecessors of such feats, landscape surveyors were frequent during the second half of the nineteenth century as part of American western expansion. Their achievement was, however, ultimately both measurable by quantity *and* quality. In discussing late nineteenth century landscape photography in the US, Joel Snyder emphasizes the qualitative dimension of such ventures suggesting a formative relationship between the land, its photographic representation, and "the character of photography itself."[35] This relationship both renders the landscape image political—in the nineteenth as well as the twenty-first century—and confirms photography's adaptability to changing circumstances. It reveals Chad Ress's driving impulses and what defines the tension between transparency and fiction in his work.

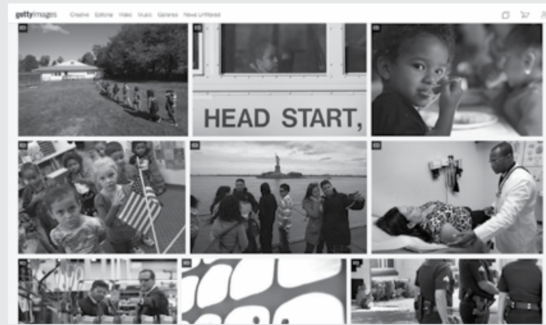
Ress's landscapes, interiors, and portraits remind viewers of the current concerning decline in public regard for government intervention in the United States. He achieves this by editorializing the matter-of-fact language of ARRA project descriptions while neither suggesting a coherent narrative as the New Deal photographs often did, nor approaching his subjects with the *New Topographics*' outspoken critique of human-altered environmental conditions. Ress's morale lies in both the drama and the unobtrusiveness of *maintenance*, the often-subtle process of "providing a person with the necessities of life" as Merriam Webster defines it. Picturing the maintenance of infrastructure means to attempt the complex task of visualizing a phenomenon that is both fleeting and mostly unobserved.[36] His photos suggest the perseverance of state-sponsored measures in the face of today's threats at dismantling important government functions altogether. These photographs make palpable the fact that the "complex and contradictory legacy"of the Obama administration cannot be easily deconstructed.[37] This massive recovery effort's sincere attempt at transparency and accountability is affirmed and prepared for posterity through an equally sincere and playfully interpretive depiction.

In conclusion, the wider importance of Ress's photographic depictions and his goal of creating a "representative not exhaustive archive" is most palpable when discussed in the context of large image collections representing ARRA projects—most notably, *crowd sourced* and *stock photography*.[38]

Both generate massive outputs of digital imagery. Both types of mass-generated images provide a framework for understanding how Ress's work walks a line between objectivity and critique.

Initially, the recovery.gov website did not feature photography at all "and instead opted for data visualization technologies such as interactive and searchable data banks."[39] This eventually changed, however, and the site, which has since been taken down, included stories with crowd-sourced images.[40] That meant that the site grew uncurated as it became crowdsourced, as anyone could submit images for consideration. At the same time, the website also began hosting stock imagery: the site hosted the most uncurated and the most curated content together, in both cases giving up control.[41] Megan Garber of *The Atlantic*, talking about stock images, points out that one quality they share "is the 'unique perspective' presented in the composition of the photos themselves." She quotes a shutterstock photographer saying "when shooting a stock photo, you want to think not just about capturing an image, but also about creating a product that will visually pop, particularly against the white backdrop of a web page." It is this photographer who explains to her that "by twisting a photo just a bit… you can create an image that will embody stock's other-worldly appeal."[42] This generic vocabulary and message is no surprise considering that, as Garber points out, "To see a stock image is… to know you're seeing a stock image."[43] Bearing this in mind, the collective image of America's post-2009 economic recovery on recovery.gov started to look like a perfect advertisement for a country presumably on the upswing, glossy, with the sun rising, featuring cute kids and caring doctors. Stock photographs are not only determined by such an agenda but also only function when curated. Their highly manipulative and highly political nature transpires on both the iconographic and curatorial level. Theirs is the bureaucrat's and politician's corporate language of advertising and branding.

Ress generates a master narrative of maintenance while he bewilders and dazzles his viewer. The languages of stock photography, however, conveys a visual message without a specific audience in mind and suited to an unknown deployment. Stock images are therefore without room for interpretation or



Recovery Act stock photographs, Getty Images.

contestation. Different from stock photo work, Ress deliberately leaves questions unanswered. His work challenges the ownership of this archive of images created of ARRA projects.[44] Given that there is no consolidated or systematically managed repository suggests that, unlike the publicly owned image archive of FSA imagery, the mental and ideological place of government-supported recovery today resides in the embattled zone of the internet. To call stock photographs "owned

by the public" is simply enabling the government's further withdrawal from funding cultural efforts. Chad Ress's work and his controlled and creative employment of photography is therefore of particular importance. His effort to complicate and render oblique government measures in the aftermath of the Great Recession should be an alert to the dangerous suggestion that stock-photos and their highly reductive message might be suitable replacements for a contextualizing and critical depiction. Ress's work reminds us of the crucial importance and evolving task of maintaining and training our visual literacy in order to enable deep readings of images.

Ress's work has to be understood as part of the historical lineage of landscape photography, which has always juggled the quest for documentary representation and systematization on the one hand and photography's enormous suggestive, interpretive and manipulative capacities on the other. Transparency, while the declared aim of any photographic surveyor, never operates on its own. The democratic quest for transparency and comprehensiveness is always joined by its interpreting and reflecting partner, fiction. Artists like Ress, Wall, Adams, Baltz and the Bechers, each in their own way, have used this relationship on behalf of their creative endeavors and have kept challenging and provoking reactions and responses. Ress's unique challenge amongst these artists is his place in a generation obliged to take a stance, in the age of mass distributed digital imagery. He lives in an era that promotes "un-creative" artistic production that suggests deliberate use, appropriation, and reuse of parts of original works of art.[45] His own fascination with stock photography on the one hand, and his clear embrace and appropriation of predecessors' aesthetic strategies on the other, both typify contested positions between which Ress and artists of his moment find themselves. His artistic language and use of the medium might be understood as a photographic metalanguage that engages photography's enormous technical and compositional capabilities assessing the balance between the documentary and fictional each time anew.

Originally published in America Recovered, photographs By Chad Ress. Actar Publishers, New York & Barcelona, 2019.