

Dyer, Geoff.
"Look right, then left."
The Guardian.
January 6, 2007.

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Saturday January 6, 2007

Guardian

Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America

by Joel Sternfeld
Steidl, £40

One of the most moving photographs I know is also one of the dullest: an empty, uninteresting-looking room with a brown carpet and beige walls. It comes at the end of Joel Sternfeld's book *On This Site* (1996). On each of the previous recto pages is a colour photo of an ordinary bit of America: a street corner, a rural grocery store (reminiscent of ones photographed by Walker Evans in the 30s), an urban hotel, a deserted highway. On each of the facing pages a brief text explains that this is, respectively: the place in Queens where a woman was stabbed to death outside her apartment; the store in Mississippi where 14-year-old Emmett Till addressed a white woman as "baby" and, as a result, was kidnapped, tortured and killed; the hotel where presidents of the major tobacco companies decided to begin an aggressive advertising campaign to counter scientific claims that cigarette smoke caused cancer; the road in Oklahoma where Karen Silkwood died after "crashing" her car. A catalogue of hideous violence and atrocious corporate greed, *On This Site* turns apparently random places into photographic memorials.

The picture I referred to at the beginning is a kind of postscript; it comes after the Afterword, after the acknowledgments. The dull room is in the Masjid-Al-Rasul mosque in Watts, where "members of the Bloods and the Crips, rival Los Angeles gangs, negotiated and signed a truce on April 26, 1992". In the aftermath of all that has gone before, the promise of this picture is all the more immense for being tentative, provisional. It offers simple documentary proof of Maxim Gorky's belief that "Life will always be bad enough for the desire for something better not to be extinguished in men."

There is something distinctly Russian about progress being negatively affirmed in this way. An American version would reverse the emphasis: however good life is it will never be so good that people stop wanting something better. Implicit in the foundation myth of America, the utopian impulse is etched into the country's history and geography. On hearing of the lure of California, one of the Polish emigrants in Susan Sontag's *In America* points out how American it is, the idea "that America has its America, its better destination where everyone dreams of going". Often this ambition operates simply at the level of endlessly mobilising consumer demand. An alternative expression of the same impulse explicitly rejects - or, in the testaments of Emerson and Thoreau, seeks to transcend - a version of satisfaction which generates insatiability. The other key part of the American estate, pragmatism, has sought to make the utopian yearning tangible, not through revolutionary overthrow of the existing order (as advocated by Marx and Engels) but by establishing small "communities of common purpose". Some of these have survived into the era of triumphal capitalism that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some ... well, we'll come to them in a moment.

Sternfeld identifies three periods in which experimental communities bloomed. The first, in direct response to the dehumanising blight of the factory system, occurred between 1810 and 1860. Thereafter communities were set up sporadically - particularly in California - but it was not until

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the 1960s and the mushrooming hippy counterculture that there was another peak in utopian activity. The third phase, under way for about 15 years, has seen the spread of eco-villages or co-housing communities.

The companion volume to *On This Site*, *Sweet Earth* deploys the same format. On one page are photographs of the grounds of a community or of one or more of its members. On the facing verso page Sternfeld tells the story of the pictured community. In some instances all that remains are ruins, visible signs of poor planning or corrupted ideals. The stories of the failures are often hilarious. Here is what happened during the terminal phases of Biosphere 2 in Arizona: "As conditions worsened ... tensions mounted among the crew. On the first anniversary of the experiment, Jane Goodall visited to observe the inhabitants. Allegations of food-hoarding and food-stealing abounded, and the Biospherians had splintered into two antagonistic groups. Though most had televisions in their apartments, they reportedly found it too tortuous to watch because of McDonald's advertisements." Where the founding principles are polygamy and free love, jealousy and sexual abuse have a habit of flourishing. At the other end of the spectrum, celibacy - popular among the first, religiously-inspired wave of settlements - is a mandate for self-extinction.

Many of the places founded in the 60s fell victim to their own success, attracting people who would lead, ultimately, to their collapse. This is what happened in Drop City, both the real one (or all that's left of it) photographed by Sternfeld in Colorado, and the fictive one imaginatively transplanted to California by TC Boyle in his novel of that name. "Drop City?" says the driver to a hitchhiker who has just announced where he's heading. "You mean that hippy place? Isn't that where everybody's nude and they just ball and do dope all day?" The Drop is doomed by its allure. As Sternfeld points out, however, every societal enterprise is marked by widespread failure. "We don't do away with the institution of marriage or corporations simply because there are divorces and bankruptcies."

In any case, the mistakes, farces and failures make the successes more heartening. Some places - like the Farm in Summertown, Tennessee - have not simply survived but thrived, keeping faith with their own varied ethics - self-reliance, eco-purity and so on - and generating wealth. Having learned from the heady excesses of the 60s and 70s, the current wave of settlement is marked by less radical declarations of shared purpose - no income sharing or cult-like dedication. The modest ambitions of these eco-villages, Sternfeld suggests, may make them the most durable and viable models of community living.

Along with William Eggleston, Joel Meyerowitz and Stephen Shore, Sternfeld was one of the pioneers of colour photography in the 70s. (With a zeal appropriate to *Sweet Earth* he has referred to that time as "the early Christian era of colour photography".) First published in 1989, his *American Prospects* is both a benchmark book in its own right and an important chapter in the ongoing tradition of photographers such as Walker Evans (*American Photographs*) and Robert Frank (*The Americans*) making visual records of their road trips through the country.

Few of the individual photographs in *Sweet Earth* have the totalising clarity, the weird quality of hermetic suspense, of those in *American Prospects*. Does the fact that the pictures do not speak for themselves - that they need to be seen in tandem with an accompanying text - diminish the value of the book? In a way it is an impertinence to ask, for this, precisely, was the question posed by Sternfeld himself in *On This Site*. It was we, the viewers, who were being interrogated, forced to answer the most basic of questions: do you have any idea what you are looking at? The conceptual tension of the book was generated by the gap between the unseen (the words) and the seen (the pictures). Once the freight of invisible narrative was revealed, the gap became a bridge.

Sweet Earth continues Sternfeld's formal investigation into what he terms "knowability", but the result, appropriately enough, is more accommodating. A history of endeavour, hope and

resilience resides in these places, in these photographs; the texts offer a kind of hospitality, an invitation to step inside, to share in it.

• Geoff Dyer's *The Ongoing Moment (Abacus)*, won the Infinity award from the International Center of Photography