

# Imagine being here now<sup>1</sup>

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Like any hopeful tourist I had imagined Iceland for years, but this essay was written before I finally got there, so I will address my own heavily visited turf – the small city of Santa Fe in northern New Mexico – hoping that I can cross our increasingly porous borders, even though Iceland/New Mexico might seem to be a classic case of apples and oranges. (Iceland has a much more vital art scene, but we do share spectacular landscapes and similarly marginal and romanticized identities. And the US military has occupied both of us.) I have never taken a nature-based or ecotour, or been a tour operator, except for hiking with small groups around my rural home ground. But whenever I travel, I try to get out into the landscape on my own, and I always try to remember that ‘nature’ includes human beings, that seeking out the nature of urban places is as challenging as supposedly ‘pristine’ wildernesses.

*Imagine Being Here Now* is a title that I have for years offered up in advance when I am still unsure of what I’ll write about, but also because I enjoy the paradox. Why would we have to imagine a place if we are right here now? Because we’re always doing it, because every day we imagine and then live a version of our new stories, our histories, which we then disseminate through friends and family...and photography. “Imagine”, John Lennon exhorted us. And artist David Wojnarowicz said in the 1980s, “I’m beginning to think that one of the last frontiers left for radical gestures is the imagination” (Wojnarowicz 1989, 10).

What’s significant is the relationship of imagination to reality and action, especially for artists and writers who specialize in acting in the gap between the two, or between art and life. Lean too far on the imagination side and we risk falling off the edge into wishful thinking. Lean too far on the reality side and we risk getting stuck in the status quo. I raise this as a context in which to think about the relationship between imagination and tourism. For instance, tourists are rarely informed that New Mexico is one of the poorest states in the union. Instead we are called the ‘Land of Enchantment’, for our dramatic landscape, and Santa Fe is the ‘City Different’.

Like Reykjavík, Santa Fe is a tourist destination embedded in an extraordinary landscape that is a prime attraction, along with its indigenous inhabitants. It beckons to those dashing by, though much of it is private land and decidedly not open to trespassing, which, I admit, is one of my favorite modes of tourism. In order to have any idea of where you are, it’s really necessary to take time, to walk and look around. (And that’s not easy if you are guiding a large group of people with different capacities.) ‘Landscape’, like ‘place’, has become a self-conscious rather than an organic concept. But in the process of following the vortex of land and lives, a tantalizing liminal space has opened up between disciplines, between the arts, geography, history, archeology, sociology – space occupied by people like Trevor Paglen, who follows the black sites of governmental secrecy, and

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<sup>1</sup> The following text includes some borrowings from my books *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1997) and *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art and Place* (1999), as well as from lectures I have given in Reykjavík, Iceland; Seville, Spain; and Falmouth, England.

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Matthew Coolidge of the Los Angeles-based Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI). Both identify as ‘experimental geographers’, offering photographic and geographical analysis of the built environment. CLUI catalogues all kinds of unexpected vernacular, industrial and military land use from deadpan but unconventional perspectives in its data base, trumping cynicism as it works on a fine line between invisible politics, earth science, social science, art and cultural geography. Sometimes CLUI organizes actual bus tours, showing related art videos along the way.

The reality of space is always contestable, whether one is living in it, visiting it, or touring it. Imagined space, on the other hand, is easily available. Virtually from its inception, tourism and tourist destinations have been imagined or re-imagined for us by capital, or

capitalized by imagination; at the same time they’re defined by our own realities (figure 1). Santa Fe, like all places, is many different places, located somewhere between reality and the imagination, depending on one’s lived experience and associations. But over the last century – and the celebration of our 400th anniversary in 2010 didn’t help – it’s been commodified far beyond the usual expectations. Tourism has the potential to put any place in *quotation marks*. For almost a century, Santa Fe has been set aside from normality, highlighted and exaggerated by these quotation marks.

J. B. Jackson – the great essayist, cultural geographer, and ‘geohistorian’ of the New Mexico landscape – wrote that

no landscape, vernacular or otherwise, can be comprehended unless we perceive it as an organization of space; unless we ask



**Figure 1** *This is not a commercial, this is my homeland.* (Artist: Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie 1998, reproduced with permission).

ourselves who owns or uses those spaces, how they were created and how they change (Jackson 1984, 8).

Inspired by his writings, fourteen years ago I wrote a book on the significance of place and contemporary art – *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* – which has sparked most of my work ever since. The message was that no matter how long or short a time we live in a place we inherit the responsibility for knowing about it, valuing it, working to keep it viable, and illuminating our dynamic cultural spaces and their underlying, often invisible meanings and uses. If a local is someone who gives more than she takes, everybody is a candidate. The book title’s plural – senses of place – is crucial, since we each have our own places within shared places. And the concocted word ‘multicentered’ reminds us how uprooted our societies are and simultaneously insists that we can put down shallow but tough roots wherever we find ourselves. In fact it’s downright dangerous not to do so – both personally and generally – for places, for other people, other life, and for a planet in the grip of climate chaos.

Constructive, critical tourism that is good for both visitors and visited depends on a real sense of place – a virtual immersion that depends both on lived experience and on topographical, even infrastructural, intimacy, not to mention acquired knowledge on the ground and in the books. Yet as French Situationist Guy Debord has remarked, “Capitalist production has unified space,” producing “an extensive and intensive process of banalization” (Debord 1970, 165). And more recently it has been observed that globalization compresses time and space. Ludwig Feuerbach, who died in 1872, already observed that “Without a doubt our epoch prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality. Appearance to being. Only illusion is sacred” (quoted in

Law 1979, 1). It’s kind of depressing that it’s still so relevant one hundred and forty years later.

Middle class Americans would rather tour Europe than most places in the United States, but when they can’t afford to go abroad they often come to New Mexico. It’s as close to a foreign country as you can get within our national borders, and this is a mixed blessing for those who live there. The state has gained in taxes, volunteerism, and philanthropy. But it is taken for granted that New Mexicans sneer at tourists... even though many of us were introduced to this place as tourists. We are ambivalent, as I suspect Icelanders are. Yet we’re hugely dependent on tourism, along with the nuclear industry, the military, mining, and now Hollywood. We are not alone. Towns, regions, whole states in the western U.S. are falling back on tourism as their traditional bases crumble – a desperate ploy in landscapes that have been played out by extractive industries – mining, timber, gas and oil, and livestock overgrazing. In comparison, tourism is touted as low impact and environmentally correct – ‘the lesser evil’. Yet more boutiques, more restaurants, more high-end homes, more roads, more infrastructure – are very hard on the fragile landscape of the high desert.

In the 1980s, the cultural and heritage tourism that had sustained Santa Fe for decades gave birth to something still more self-conscious called ‘Santa Fe Style’. The original city was entirely built of adobes, or mud bricks. Today only the rich can afford them because adobe building is very labor intensive, and much of the historic district is really constructed of fake adobe – stucco over frame, which satisfies those more concerned with ‘style’ than substance. Santa Fe is a city in disguise. Its Historic Design Review Board dictates every architectural detail in downtown Santa Fe so that nothing deviates from the Pueblo

Revival style adopted at statehood in 1912. But the apparent uniformity has actually given birth to true subtlety, which is what finally makes Santa Fe such an interesting and multi-faceted city. From the outside, the artificial setting – aka Adobe Disneyland – is overwhelming. But on close scrutiny, each apparently similar adobe is truly different, even those that are part of ‘Santa Fake’ (or ‘Fanta Se’). The same can be said of the initially monotonous arid landscape that hides its secrets so well.

Santa Fe Style appropriates not only adobe but the material culture of those who can no longer afford to buy their own antiques or arts. Navajo weaving, Pueblo design, Hispano wood and tinwork, cowboy art, aristocratic elegance and plebeian modesty do not come cheap. The owners of Santa Fe Style trophy homes – more California than New Mexico, far larger than any traditional ‘haciendas,’ often perched on ridge tops above the city – often feel compelled to dress the part in a bizarre pastiche of Navajo, Pueblo and Hispano, loaded with velvet and silver, designer jeans and upscale cowboy boots never meant to tramp in manure. Many of the wealthy part timers have bought huge ranches on which they don’t bother to raise cattle, even when they dress the part – giving rise to the derogatory saying ‘he’s all hat, no cows’.

This may sound like a caricature. And it only applies to a small, but very visible part of the tourist population; of course once you own a home in Santa Fe you are no longer strictly a tourist, so I use the term Second Home Tourists for those who own large houses but live in them only a few weeks a year. Cultural historian Chris Wilson, in his groundbreaking book *The Myth of Santa Fe*, rightly condemns the “shallow gratification” of Santa Fe style, which has, he says, “provided a marketing image for the tourist economy” (Wilson 1997, 310).

Wilson advocates “a critical regionalism that harnesses the tourist economy for local social needs and develops housing forms that balance individuality with community” (Wilson 1997, 310). But he warned that this was for the residents of Santa Fe to decide. If tourism can’t sustain social justice and environmental sustainability at the same time that it brings economic benefits, it’s not worth cultivating. How to offer an accurate, layered, sophisticated but not elitist presentation of this fascinating city and its surrounding landscape, integral to its identity, poses a great challenge.

The concept of a ‘critical regionalism’, often more critical than regional, is popular these days in landscape and architectural studies. It also offers the possibility of redefining tourism, an industry generally dependent on uncritical regionalism. Santa Fe itself is a classic example of a powerful regionalism about to collapse under the weight of its myths. The past has an iron hold on the urban landscape for once and for all. Writer Bill deBuys observed that those who reinvented this place around 1912 as the City Different might wonder “not that their vision was so successful, but that it went unrenewed for so long” (deBuys 1994, 21).

Tourism removes us from the realities of lived space, experienced spaces. The view, or the scenic overlook, for instance, is a readymade photograph waiting to be snapped, a point from which to look at another place. It’s also totally removed from actual experience, even as it may move us deeply for a moment. Do we really travel only to stare off into another place where we can’t go? Nature beckons you in, but just so far. This is comforting to many tourists. No need to climb that mountain, struggle down that slope, get muddy shoes on that train, stand in the rain. Selective tourism is a protective strategy. Veteran tourists learn

to distinguish their spaces. There's nothing quaint about the commercial strip running north south in Santa Fe. So tourists may go there to fill up on fuel or do some quick non-souvenir shopping but they will soon forget it as they keep their minds firmly on the 'historic downtown', the reason for their presence. Tourists in Santa Fe are usually happy with what they get – a small palatable dose of *otherness* embedded in exactly the same consumerism as the commercial strip, but visually disguised.

In the process of emphasizing its difference, Santa Fe has separated itself not only from the rest of the U.S. but from much of New Mexico, not least because of its newcomers from elsewhere in the U.S. whose incomes far exceed those of most Native Santa Feans. Thanks to a certain snobbery and to the competition that is an earmark of capitalism, New Mexicans who trace their ancestry back to the 17th or 18th century, some of whom consider themselves Spanish and unrelated to indigenous peoples, are threatened by the influx of their poorer, often *mestizo* cousins from Mexico, driven over the border by economic forces, in search of a better life or in some cases of life itself. Native New Mexicans do not welcome change, because they feel strongly, and, alas, justifiably, that change always seems to work against them. Newcomers to New Mexico discover that resettling there can be a downright surrealist experience, like tourism itself, in which people coming from very different places find themselves juxtaposed and superimposed to create a new reality, a collage, that's not entirely real to anyone.

History and nostalgia for an often mummified past make Santa Fe appealing. And of course, history, created and recreated, is the mother lode of tourism. Icelanders would have to adjust their historical watches, because by American standards, New Mexico is very ancient, which means

the Spanish colonized it in 1598. The Villa Real de Santa Fe, founded around 1607, is the oldest capital city in the U.S. and the only one that remains practically bilingual. Spanish is still the first language for many older New Mexicans. Of course there are the ruins of huge stone towns built by indigenous people many centuries before that, but Indian cultures are not counted in American history. They are called *pre-history*, as though there was no history until Europeans came to write it down.

Tourist brochures make a big deal of Santa Fe's unique 'tricultural' heritage. Its selling points are shared by Navajo and Apaches and the supposedly mysterious Anasazi Indians (ancestors of today's Pueblo peoples), by the Conquistadores and Franciscan friars of the seventeenth century, by Billy the Kid, outlaw hero of the Old West, and by Georgia O'Keeffe, heroine of high modernism (figure 2). The arid landscape plays a significant role as the dramatic backdrop for all this romance. Indigenous, Hispano and Anglo cultures do live side by side, though not necessarily together. In a complex history of mixing and separation, their stories are intertwined. There are also subcurrents of African, Moorish, and Jewish cultures as well, but these have never succeeded in rising to the touristic surface. However Arabic words form a major part of the New Mexico's place names and vocabulary in Spanish or English – *arid, acequia, adobe, Los Alamos*, and so forth. The influx in the 1850s of the so-called Americans, or Anglos – everyone who is not Hispano or Indian – exacerbated the divisions of wealth, culture, class, and especially ethnic identity that fuel local antagonisms today, though these are generally ignored when the city is presented to strangers.

Some travel agents break nature-based tourism into categories. Basic ecotourism is learning about the interrelationship of living organisms in different natural areas



**Figure 2** O’Keeffe (Photo: Lucy Lippard).

and about scientific research being performed in the field. ‘Soft’ natural history, or a vague outdoorsy focus might include short nature trails, usually including signs that can be both informative and annoying. ‘Hard’ natural history is interest specific, like birding. And Adventure Tourism would be rock climbing, whitewater rafting – an eco-stretch. Most of these run the risk of becoming eco-colonialism, especially if they ignore the role of humans in their ecosystems.

Tourism is too often discussed solely from the viewpoint of the visitors rather than that of the visited, which in a broad sense includes wildlife, rivers, forests, and so forth, though other species have very little to say about what becomes of them and their habitats. Preservationist Jonathan Daniels (quoted in Jakle 1987) observes that poverty “will keep old things as they are”. That is, until taxes are so high that no original family can survive them, as in Santa Fe’s gentrified east side, where Anglos have displaced most longtime Hispanic

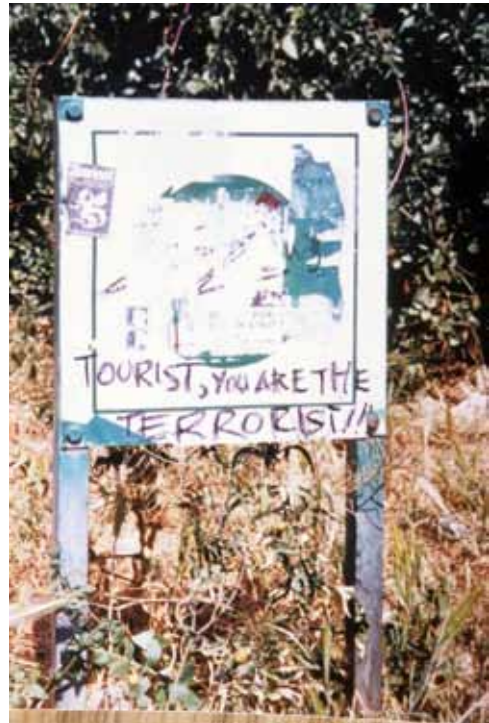
residents. Ordinary people’s lives are seldom commemorated unless their remains have become quaint, as in Rancho de las Golandrinas – a ‘living history museum’ near Santa Fe that is a successful and mostly respectful marketing of memory. Some cities, like New York or London, can be mapped as global cities. Santa Fe has been forced to remain regional in order to profit from tourism and the film industry, even as it prices itself out of the local market. Towns like Santa Fe are severed from the present in a hyped up, idealized no-place or ‘privatopia’ that no longer belongs to the people who belong there.

In the American west, nature is politics and politics has a profound effect on nature. A decade or so ago there was a popular bumper sticker in Santa Fe that read “More Mining, Less Tourism.” Mining was considered more acceptably macho, more ‘natural’, more ‘Western’, as in the ‘Wild West’. Now oil and gas development threatens the landscape that makes our state a tourist destination. Northwestern New Mexico has

become a national sacrifice area in favor of gas and oil development. The election of a Republican governor hell-bent on banning all environmental regulations that might discourage big business is exacerbating the situation.

As is now pretty obvious, a history unmoored, a history that serves up events and places out of context, refusing or unable to share its real story, is transformed by capital into commerce. Dean MacCannell (1992) even concludes that “cultural tourism blocks our access to cultural origins.” I assume he means that the real stories remain hidden or become secret, like Pueblo religion in New Mexico during Spanish colonialism. He recommends that we cultivate “respect for the gap” between tourists and the toured, “a gap that can be narrowed but never closed.” In Santa Fe that same gap exists between many Hispano natives and almost any Anglo, even those whose families have been in the area for generations, because Santa Fe at heart is a Hispano city, though built over ancient indigenous pueblo ruins.

If you’re a longtime local, and you’re the object of the casual touristic glance; if your lives and histories are made relevant only by the leisurization of your places, you have to take the tourist industry pretty damn seriously (figure 3). In New Mexico this often tragic role is played by Native Americans, whose homes are perceived as existing solely for scrutiny. Pueblo Indians live on small Indian reservations, constricted, fragmented, and modernized versions of the great towns they lived in centuries ago, Taos Pueblo being the only one that still resembles the original centers. Santa Clara Pueblo scholar Rina Swentzell (quoted in Flinn 1992, E-5) asks how people there can “live a normal life when 20 people a day come into their communities asking them why they dress like that, why they build their houses like that, why they live



**Figure 3** Tourist terrorist, Barcelona  
(Photo: Lucy Lippard).

the way they do. You say you want diversity,” she says with some exasperation, “but the more you want diversity the more you are destroying it”.

I’m always asking myself exactly what an intelligent local tourism would be, how to forge a communicable form of local history that longtime residents would be able to embrace. I keep hoping that both Native peoples and artists will begin to create new tourisms, to help the rest of us divest ourselves of cultural expectations we’ve been fed by the blanding or blanching out of western history, so we don’t get rushed along the beaten track of lowest common denominators, herded by vast oversimplifications of the complexities and contradictions of place, which can end up erasing the multiple truths of real history. What we have now is what geographer Edward Soja (1989) calls a ‘thirdspace’ or ‘Landscape Three’ created by constant border crossings between the real

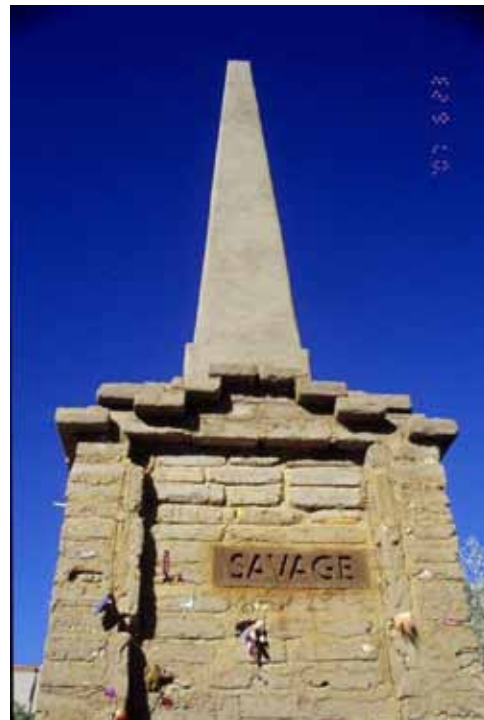
and the imagined, the local and the global. New Mexico is that place in many ways. Our thirdspace is tourism itself, a *consumption* of other places, other cultures, or the digestion of their powers. The advantage of regionalism is that outside influences get sifted through a local filter, instead of a global one. I advocate for the juxtaposition of the big picture and the little picture, producing a porous, decentered landscape with holes where tourists can creep in and out.

In New Mexico, cross-cultural tourism is inevitably cultural trespassing. This landscape by which we are all so *enchanted* -- no matter how claimed, how exploited, how desecrated, how contested -- remains the homeplace of Native Americans. We'd understand our own psychic landscapes far better if we always began with indigenous occupation and built from it. In the Southwest, Native peoples share the photographic fringing line with the landscape. The public tends to conflate all the complex Indian cultures with either nature itself, an anachronistic fantasy, or with the beige and turquoise-decorated art galleries, in which one can find various examples of shameless theft of Native imagery.

A multi-centered public art can challenge communities to construct their own narratives. For instance, in 1999 the SITE Santa Fe biennial commissioned Charlene Teters, who's a Spokane Indian, and she made *Obelisk: To the Heroes*, an adobe replica of the Soldier's Monument, a stone obelisk in the center of the Santa Fe plaza, erected in 1867 and inscribed "To heroes that fought in various battles against the savage Indians" (figure 4). Around 20 years ago, in broad daylight, a man dressed as a workman climbed the iron fence around the monument and chiseled out the word *savage*. Nobody paid much attention to him. That single lost word -- SAVAGE -- reappears on Teter's sculpture, to reverse the victim status of Native peoples. Teter's

own memories are embedded in the adobe surface -- plastic toys, jewelry, letters, coins -- each with specific meaning to the artist and perhaps to other Indian people. But she also encouraged visitors to help themselves to these objects, in the long honored tradition of the giveaway. The public began to leave things around the obelisk in return. For over two years, Teters' adobe obelisk stood in a very visible spot outside the New Mexico State Capitol. If it had remained long enough, it would have melted back into the earth from which it came, as many Pueblo villages have.

A clear sense of how we are manipulated by representation is a necessary tool for surviving postmodern life, pointing up aspects of the contemporary experience. If the beholding eye or the tourist gaze is inevitably socially constructed, who would be better at framing it than artists? We



**Figure 4** *Obelisk; For the Heroes*.  
(Artist: Charlene Teters, 1999. Photo reproduced with her permission.)

can't trust eyes that lack peripheral vision. I think of Rebecca Solnit's (2010) beautiful book *Infinite City*, an innovative atlas of San Francisco, in collaboration with artists and cartographers, which crosses invisible interdisciplinary borders and opens the real city to the intelligent gaze. Just as much as been written about the tourist's complicity in situations tourists simultaneously deplore, so artists are complicitous in the way the world is seen, since teaching people how to see is the artist's business. The dialectical relationship of the real past to the simulacra or cosmetized versions that nourish conventional tourism should be grist for a cantankerous art.

I was interested to see Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson quoted in *Art in America*, saying that the recent financial collapse had "energized the local art scene and become an opportunity" (Wei 2010, 99). I wondered how, and what role representation and tourism played in this process. Since Santa Fe is deeply dependent on tourism, I once suggested that its most high-profile avant garde venue, *Site Santa Fe*, might want to take the bull by the horns and do an exhibition on tourism that took place all over town, presenting views from the varied perspectives of visitors, visitees, longtime residents, newcomers, etc., which could spark a multivalent and socially necessary dialogue. (They were not interested.)

Tourism imposes a disguise on locals, whether they like it or not. I have a poster on my wall that reads "Nothing About Us Without Us is For Us." One of the problems local people have with tourism is that they are rarely included except as poorly paid service workers. We who live in any place have inherited the responsibility of valuing the landscape and communicating the meanings of our dynamic cultural spaces to those who don't. Local artists can be facilitators or better yet *animators* rather than the trickle-down interpreters of an

expressive place. This would encourage a two-way street, a way of thinking about tourism as an exchange between visitors and visited. We could deconstruct and reconstruct existing tourist literature. The bland travel magazines could be revamped to allow for some debates, some critical thinking, some responses from those who are stared at, some double-edged images. An exhibition catalogue could double as a guidebook, telling us some of the stories buried in the places we pass, helping us to re-imagine them. Performance artists might roam the city as random tour guides (rather than the wonderful but passive 'statues' so common in European cities). Collaboration is the social extension of the collage that is every place. Collaboration with those who are *of the place*, including scientists who know it close-up, in excruciating detail, would make the whole enterprise far more complex and more layered. Local maps, booklets, brochures could be collectively created by the residents with local artists and writers. Artists and their local collaborators could consult with various agencies and non-profits to discover the root issues in the location. One shared by Iceland and New Mexico might be the preservation of 'countryside' (also spelled with a *c* instead of an *s*, as in genocide and suicide) and sustainable agriculture. The further afield a tour or a literally 'traveling exhibition' could be spread, the more interesting it would be, and the more people it would reach. There's always the danger that it could get too scattered, too diluted, but it might be worth it to trade off coherence for broader accessibility. A tour concentrated entirely on a bioregion, or on the ecology of a single site (or perhaps multiple places) would also be provocative, especially if it emphasized problem solving, landscape restoration, preservation of ecosystems and endangered species. Visiting photographers (and I'm sure Iceland gets a lot of them, as we

do in New Mexico) could team up with local people to participate in the tourism process from both sides of the mirror, helping to shape the way our places are seen. I like to think in terms of ripple effects moving out from consciously lived experience – how those ripples affect your center and where other rings intercede to affect you and the environment, and so forth.

It might be interesting to work with tourist agencies to create a series of village initiatives, something that may exist in other parts of the world. ‘Community Tours’ led by residents could subvert conventional knowledge. I live in a tiny rural village – population under 300. It is beautiful and silent, but I like to contradict that initial impression when I show friends around by telling stories that support a local saying: *Pueblo chico, infierno grande* (Small town, big hell). And I fantasize about how we would present ourselves to outsiders, given our rich and diverse history. It would definitely be a learning process for all concerned, and the emerging stories would be multiple and contradictory, like the village itself.

Discussions of tourism are always fraught with contradictions. And contradictions are what define a diverse and multicentered society, the kind of place I want my community to be. I keep looking for art forms that are buried in social energies not yet recognized as art. I could imagine a ‘multicentered’ tour that focused on the many dissimilar parts of one place – an on-site collage acknowledging dislocation and displacement, centers brought to peripheries, communicating from one place to another. The transcultural collaborative work of Andrea Robbins and Max Becher considers displacement – what they have called transportation of place, like the remains of a German colonial manager’s home in Namibia. Their work produces a surreal disconnection from place at the same time that it informs the general no-

tion of place.

When all is said and done, the heart of all experience of place lies in the journey, time spent – more in the process than the product, as we proclaimed in the 1960s. That said, can artists really help reform tourism? The art world is as captive to Capital and globalization as any other business. Even artists who have the most radical politics and a powerful desire to transcend their given context work within the circumscribed territory doled out to them. If artists frame what we see and how we see, the ultimate frame we need to address is the limitations imposed by society itself and by exhausted notions of art and its functions. For all our problems, I think New Mexicans have been *internally* pretty successful in passing living history on to the next generations. However, the past can only sustain a vital urban landscape for so long. Tourism brings us the outside world, and will continue to be a crucial part of the story. And a vibrant small city needs to be in touch with the world. Insularity is no longer an option.

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