

WHAT WE BOUGHT

BY TOD PAPAGEORGE

IN APRIL 2000, THE YALE UNIVERSITY ART Gallery purchased the 193 prints that compose Robert Adams's *What We Bought: The New World*, a body of work that had been completed by the American photographer twenty-five years before. The unusual number, and quality, of these photographs distinguished this purchase as an extraordinary addition to the Gallery's collections. Even more remarkable, however, was that the group as a whole constituted the single complete set of this signature work that Adams ever produced.

How did this powerful collection of pictures, printed in a unique edition by the most restlessly inventive photographer of the American landscape since Edward Weston, remain intact for more than two decades before becoming available for acquisition, or even being exhibited?<sup>1</sup> The following text outlines the surprising history of *What We Bought*, and the ways in which that history was shaped both by the unique nature of photography, and the irresistible mechanics of chance.

BETWEEN 1968 AND 1974, ROBERT ADAMS completed two bodies of related photographs that would result in the publication of his highly influential *The New West* (1974) and, following that, *denver* (1977), a book that represented the results of a project he had completed on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1973 – 74. Two decades later, the Foundation of Lower Saxony awarded the Spectrum International Prize for Photography to Adams for his nearly thirty years of achievement, and with it offered him the opportunity to select a body of his work for

---

*This essay was originally written in 2002 for the Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin. Copyright © 2002 by Tod Papageorge. Papageorge has been the Director of Graduate Studies in Photography at the Yale School of Art since 1979. A book of his work, American Sports, 1970, or, How We Spent the War in Vietnam, was recently published by Aperture. The Missing Criticism series republishes out-of-print writing on photography.*

publication. Adams remembered a large group of about three hundred prints from the Guggenheim project that had not been included in *denver*, but which, after the editing of the book was finished, he had wrapped, boxed, and stored away under a worktable in his studio. He proposed these photographs for publication, and following a visit from Thomas Weski, a photographer and curator from the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, Germany, *What We Bought: The New World* was published in conjunction with a 1995 exhibition at the Sprengel.<sup>2</sup>

Adams's descriptive title for *What We Bought — Scenes from the Denver Metropolitan Area, 1970 – 1974* — echoed the full title of his 1977 book, *denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area*, rejoining the two to the Guggenheim project that produced them; his subtitle for it — *The New World* — invoked *The New West*. Given this, and the correspondences of subject and photographic style that link them, these books can fairly be said to constitute a trilogy, one produced in the white heat of Adams's first extended study of the depredations of urban sprawl; specifically, the flourishing forms of it he found metastasizing along the length of Colorado's interstate highways and through the suburban developments that followed those roads beyond Colorado Springs and into the Front Range of the Rockies.

Adams had returned to Colorado from California in 1962 to accept a position as an assistant professor of English at Colorado College<sup>3</sup> and, perhaps because of his interest in film, had, within a short time, learned the basic techniques of still photography. Remarkably, while continuing to teach a full schedule of classes, but committing what spare hours he had to photographing, he was able to produce the pictures that would make up *White Churches of the Plains* (1970), his first monograph, and *The Architecture and Art of Early Hispanic Colorado* (1974), using a tripod-mounted view camera — and a relatively impassive style of picture-making — for both projects. In the fall of 1967, however, Adams reduced by two-thirds his full-time teaching responsibilities to give himself more opportunity to photograph, and, a year later, in September 1968, began to make the pictures in the suburbs of Colorado Springs and then Denver that would become *The New West*.

Adams turned for this work to a camera he had bought that summer while traveling in Europe. Unlike the view camera, which was limited to making a single exposure at a time, this new, hand-held Rolleiflex could produce as

many as a dozen 2 1/4" square negatives in rapid succession on a single roll of film, an advantage that he clearly thought would allow him a more effective way to record the extent and velocity of the destruction he was seeing everywhere around him.<sup>4</sup> Then, too, he may have felt that the square Rolleiflex format was an appropriately inert shape for framing the graceless, contemporary West he had now grasped as his subject.

I first saw a group of these pictures in a 1971 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. At the time, the dark canyons of Manhattan supplied the arena for much of the strongest photographic work being made in the country — a view ratified by *New Documents*, a 1967 landmark exhibition at the same museum featuring the work of Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander — but Adams's transparent, distant views of tract homes, shopping strips, and the concrete-block churches appending them demonstrated that the greater American landscape could once again provide the material of photographic vision. For me, however, and for the other photographers I knew who visited this exhibition, the surprise of these unprepossessing, six-inch-square pictures resided less in their subject, or in Adams's feelings about it — after all, sprawl has never been a difficult problem to identify and condemn, particularly in the antiestablishment sixties — than it did in the way he had printed his photographs to distill the brilliant Colorado sunlight to a virtually nuclear intensity that, even as it glared down on the poor things it exposed, seemed to envelop and, occasionally, succor them.

This pitiless light, virtually combusting in the thin Colorado air, was, I thought, an invention born in the certain glare of the place of course but also in Adams's intentional wringing-out of the tonal range of his prints to the bright end of the photographic gray scale — roughly comparable to a composer writing for the piano at its highest octaves.<sup>5</sup> I had never seen anything quite like it; only later did I imagine a possible source for it in the incandescent light that transfigures nineteenth-century wet-plate photographs. But unlike Adams's deliberate, mediated technique for achieving this intense luminance, wet-plate photographers had been able to assume that the beautiful light their pictures described would be produced inevitably, as the result of a chemical process: the orthochromatic coating these early photographers applied to their glass plates was particularly sensitive to the blue range of the

color spectrum, thus overexposing skies and rendering them in the lightest possible tones.

Adams has since confirmed his debt to nineteenth-century photographers of the West, particularly Timothy O'Sullivan. In the mid-sixties he had discovered a milk crate-sized cache of O'Sullivan's prints in a Denver library and was stunned by their austere beauty. About twenty years after that, he concluded his introduction to *The American Space*, a 1983 anthology of nineteenth-century photography, by singling out O'Sullivan, comparing him to Cézanne and naming him the “greatest of the[se] photographers.”<sup>6</sup> But if O'Sullivan's influence can be traced directly in *The New West*, or, indeed, in any of Adams's work of this period, it is not through his choice of subjects — the Rockies, when they appear at all, do so minimally, as little more than irritations of the horizon; nor can it be found in the style of the work — *From the Missouri West*, made with a view camera and Adams's next project/book after the Guggenheim, forms his most direct homage to what Adams has called O'Sullivan's “architectural” method of picturing nature<sup>7</sup> — but, once again, in the way Adams transforms the heavy, palpable radiance of the light virtually inhabiting O'Sullivan's photographs (and those of his glass-plate brotherhood) into the oftentoxic presence that the photographer Lewis Baltz, in a review of *The New West*, called “the relentless light of perpetual noon.”<sup>8</sup>

While Adams's pictures likely owed a part of their effect to his thinking about nineteenth-century photography, they also provided an emphatic demonstration of how conclusively he had rejected the twentieth-century photographic convention that identified the American West with its national parks. Ansel Adams, the fountainhead/architect of this convention, had encapsulated the optimism of postwar America in his oracular, weather-tempered views of the wonders arrayed in these sequestered Edens, celebrating rock and water in a long range of photographic tones sweeping up from the low, sleek blacks of wet stone to the crystalline shimmer of snowcap. But this new Adams, by portraying a West made up of a seemingly endless series of ill-made structures embodying the tangles of easy compromise and unremarkable venality that saw them built (a portrayal drawn at the height of the Vietnam War, and, for the most part, in a harsh, monotonous light) proposed a radically different and, for photographers, revolutionary, frontier. In his view, even the immemorial land itself was

implicated in a general disaster, exhausted, as he revealed it, by human busyness.

With all of this, the most understandable place to have looked for precedence in Adams's work would have been not in Timothy O'Sullivan's pictures, but in those of Walker Evans, who, nearly forty years before Adams, had, under the sun's exacting scrutiny, photographed this country (or the territory roughly occupied by its original colonies and the cotton states) in a precise, dispassionate manner, and then gathered up the evidence in his great *American Photographs* — a possible model, in general form at least, for Adams's three books. More specifically, Evans's subjects were, in many cases, also Adams's: cars, gas stations, roadways, jerrybuilt working class cottages, modest homes sighted down empty streets, improvised churches,<sup>9</sup> and, late in Evans's career, even trash.<sup>10</sup> In addition, both men found a paradigm for their work in utilitarian pictures: if they believed (as their books demonstrate) that the individual photograph was less important to the meanings they wanted to construct than was a collection of images ordered virtually to anatomize a subject, then common picture-forms such as snapshots or survey views or commercial photographs — for example, the foursquare offerings lining the windows of real estate offices — might be the most effective vehicles for carrying out this essentially typological examination.

Adams, however, denies the influence, saying that only two or three of Evans's photographs "stuck" when he saw them. And, although his work of this period would seem to describe a more complicated relation to Evans's pictures than that, its unyielding resistance to the attractions of any solace but that of light suggests an equally resistant, and even armed, consciousness shaping it, one in which refusal, whether of influence or compromise in any form, is used to hold the world away — an attitude consistent with the emotional and physical style of this phase of Adams's picture-making.

At the very least, it seems clear that, whatever he may or may not have taken from Evans, or any of his predecessors, Adams had an intense need to believe that he was creating his work directly out of his own perceptions,<sup>11</sup> a need that could well have been born in (or precipitated) his decision to turn from teaching, and from the subjects and techniques of his earlier photography, without any sure idea of how he would manage, either financially or creatively. It is as if Adams had concluded that

the gamble he was making on his ability to carry out this transformation of his life and work could ride only on the most absolute of feelings, the clearest example of which was his categorical unwillingness to accept the condition of his new West as anything but a manifest calamity (however much he may have hoped that its light, as he described it in his pictures, might be read as a source of platonic grace): anger would fuel his work, and its purity sustain it.

Adams was unknown as a photographer when he began this project and, once he had cut back on teaching, could no longer count himself a regular part of any community larger than the one he formed with his wife, Kerstin.<sup>12</sup> Fort Carson, in Colorado Springs, where they were living, was the mustering-out point for soldiers returning from the war in Vietnam; the war's presence, along with a rising crime rate, was felt everywhere in the city. In the larger world, students in Paris had, that spring, torn up the streets of the Left Bank during the most violent revolutionary demonstrations seen in that city since the days of the 1871 Commune, and in August Chicago police had viciously attacked antiwar demonstrators at the Democratic Convention. Adams and his wife, who were traveling in her native Sweden that summer, followed the news of the war closely. At a time when any number of Americans were desperately searching for ways around the insuperable impasse that the great public catastrophe of Vietnam posed to them, it seems reasonable to conclude that Adams's readiness to give up much of what he understood himself to be, and even to know, as he began to photograph in the Front Range that fall represented for him the conclusion of a similar search and letting-go.<sup>13</sup>

My intention here is not to "valorize" Robert Adams (or this necessarily imprecise version of him), but to illuminate — or simply surround — what I consider a remarkable moment in the history of recent art. If, as I believe, Adams's work of this period stands as one of the most significant, and original, achievements produced by an American artist in the last thirty years, it was an accomplishment created and fed by the stringency of the decisions, both personal and aesthetic, that he made in the universal tumult that was 1968.

THE PICTURES THAT ADAMS BEGAN TO PRODUCE that September were resolute in their determination to eschew any type of pictorial effect in favor of a direct, matter-of-fact

descriptiveness that just avoided triviality. Rather than failing through cleverness or excess or by straining for beauty, these photographs risked that possibility by appearing to be little more than the record-keeping snapshots that architects, contractors, and developers jam into their project-files.<sup>14</sup> The drama in them, such as it was, occurred in the air, as sunlight and figured clouds took on the role of Chorus to the mute prairies, highways, four-way stops and agglomerations of building-types below, elevating them into places worth ... cherishing? No, not quite, but certainly worth contemplating as they sat there, so irrefutably *present* in their nakedness.

This sense of material actuality was born of course not in the grace or beauty of Adams's subjects; instead, it was a quality distilled from the crucible of a daily practice in which light served to nominate the modest subjects of Adams's photographs for distinction, and the physical act of picture-making confirmed that nomination by finding what Adams once described as "an unarguably right relationship of shapes, a visual stability in which all components are equally important."<sup>15</sup> Consider figure 1, for example, where a tract house, seemingly composed of two disparate, smaller models jammed into each other, is shown to be so white, so light, and so unmoored as to appear poised to levitate from its own shadow and the harsh schist they both uneasily sit on — *and* where precise placement and framing set the terms for the picture's effect: it is essential to its meaning, for instance, that the house and its chimney fit within the outline of the foothills behind it, rather than arbitrarily contesting their presence and their embracing form; it is bracing for its design that the left edge of the house is cut by the frame, a cut that, for a real estate agent, would have condemned it to the paper-shredder; and it is satisfying, for what might be called the spirit of the picture, that the house's black-lacquered cutout of a shadow — a church? a wall-sized t-shirt folded over on itself (or laid out flat, half under the house)? — is set so justly in the frame and in relation to the perfect white cutout of a miniature truck parked on a street two backyards away.

The resolution such a photograph presents so matter-of-factly obscures the often antic, always intuitive, process that goes into producing it. To take another example from *The New West*, imagine the making of figure 2, a picture detailing a pair of gas stations and what Adams calls in the book "the eschatological

chaos of signs." Here, his subjects address the photographer with strings of annunciatory pennants and the inevitable high-keyed light, in a world buffeted by winds, overlooked by shifting clouds, reshaped constantly by moving cars and the occasional figure — the scrim and rustle of the real — while Adams works near the road, taking a step or two forward, now to the side, even into traffic, as he checks and double-checks his viewfinder to see how this latest stance draws a sign down along one edge of the frame, or a ruff of thin clouds across the top, or, getting low enough, the light bouncing on the station's under-roof and looking like sun on water as it does . . . all as some other, less conscious, part of his mind, informed by experience and previous failures, struggles to anticipate the ways in which the mechanical/chemical operations of photography itself might transform the picture his eyes and body have framed (an image full of sound, dimension, color, and movement) into the silent paper-world of a black-and-white still photograph.

At the time that he was working on this project, Adams seems to have been both engulfed and thrilled by the demands of a self-assignment so large as to seem limitless. In 1969, he traveled to New York to try to find an audience for what he was doing and received the "decisive reward"<sup>16</sup> of having four of his prints purchased by the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>17</sup> He returned to Colorado more deeply committed to his work and, after being included in a 1970 *New Acquisitions* exhibition at MoMA, was invited to participate with Emmet Gowin in a two-person show there in December 1971, where thirty-one of his prints were selected for display by the curator Peter Bunnell. Following this, Adams applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship and, on receiving it, began to photograph in and around Denver early in 1973.

Adams worked from a suburban tract house in Longmont, a Denver suburb, where he had fashioned a small, unventilated darkroom in a spare bedroom. To develop the nearly five hundred rolls of film he exposed through his two years of photographing on this project, he employed a routine he had established while working on *The New West*. It involved the use of shallow custom-made trays and required that Adams make a loop of a single roll of film by taping its ends together and then manipulating it through several trays of photographic chemistry, all in pitch blackness. This procedure, requiring thirty-five to forty minutes start to finish, was more time-consuming (and finical) than that

undertaken by beginning photography students developing their first negatives in plastic tanks, and considerably more so than that employed by experienced photographers developing, in larger tanks, up to four rolls of the same type of film, or even eighteen, in another, trickier procedure employing yet another kind of tank and steel racks. But for Adams, this painstaking process was essential, because, more than any other technique he knew, it promised that his negatives would have smooth, unmottled development, allowing the sky areas of his bright prints to appear seamless as they burned away at the high end of the photographic tonal scale toward absolute, paper white.<sup>18</sup>

Adams then had to cut up the developed film as a first step to producing a contact sheet of each roll, a routine that involved sandwiching the short strips of negatives between a piece of photographic paper and a pane of glass before exposing and processing the paper in photographic chemistry. After that came the editing of the more than 5,000 pictures disposed on these sheets, a process that, remarkably, Adams has estimated required at least two or three times as many hours as he had spent in the field making the photographs. Using L-shaped pieces of file folders to isolate one, and then the next, small picture, he worked slowly, only gradually distilling the body of this work to a kind of still point, where the photographs that survived the process remained strong and clear every time he returned to consider them.

Adams finally selected about 375 negatives to enlarge, making the prints as he continued to photograph on the project and completing them in early 1975. He also mounted and matted each of them, and, as a final step to this finishing process, one that signified his approval, meticulously drew a line in black ink around the picture on the mat board supporting it.<sup>19</sup> (Adams had spent a year when he was sixteen studying architectural drawing.) Enlarged less than three times the size of the original negatives, the prints all measured between five and six inches top to bottom and, depending on the format of the camera used to make the negative and whatever minor cropping Adams may have employed, were approximately six to eight inches wide.

Following another bout of editing, Adams selected ninety-three of the prints to represent his work on the Guggenheim; these made up *denver*. The rest were spirited away under his worktable. Later that year, after he had completed this work, and with it the intense six-year effort he began in 1968, Adams, a lifelong asthmatic given to

bronchial problems, spent several weeks in rural Oregon recovering from the effects of nervous exhaustion.<sup>20</sup>

FOR NON-PHOTOGRAPHERS, THE RATIO OF negatives to pictures-in-books that Robert Adams produced on this project most likely seems large: over 5,000 pictures made and, of those, fewer than one hundred selected for initial publication. Unsurprisingly, these figures are, for photographers, less an issue than an irrelevant distraction: Garry Winogrand, on being asked in a public forum just how many pictures he had to take to make a good one, replied irritably, “Art isn’t judged in terms of industrial efficiency,” a remark that should suffice as the last word on the subject. Despite Winogrand’s dismissal, though, it might be useful, in Robert Adams’s case, to consider the question, in order to rehearse a few obvious points about the process of photographic picture-making and its inevitable relation to such numbers.

Photography is of course an analytic, not a synthesizing, medium: photographs are commonly produced all-at-once, as light strikes a piece of film.<sup>21</sup> This is unlike the other visual arts, where paintings and related kinds of pictures (including the most rapidly sketched drawing), are built through a process of accretion, stroke by stroke. Writers, too, even the most fluent, parallel these synthesizing procedures as they shape their texts one draft after another, but their practice at least suggests that of photographers, since it involves, in part, an editing process applied to words — and, by extension, to the things that words signify. As W.H. Auden put it, “it is both the glory and the shame of poetry that its medium is not its private property, that a poet cannot invent his words,”<sup>22</sup> an observation also true when applied to photography and the photographer’s inability to invent his “worlds.”

But where a poet combines, over time (be it minutes or years), the words of a shared language to make a poem, a photographer combines, instantaneously, a jumble of things-out-there (which often share little more than their adjacency) to make a picture. Individual photographs, then, are less like poems than unique ideograms, or picture-complexes, that freeze the moment when the objects, air, and dimension framed in a viewfinder are incorporated and fixed together in an unalterable mix by being exposed on film. Because any shift of lens position or subject or light (to say nothing of the camera operator’s concentration)

irremediably changes the picture the photographer will make next, his only strategy for clarifying or amending his thinking is to yield it up to making yet another exposure, and, as he does so, to add to an unseen store of images.

Unlike the artist or poet, who can revise a given work without accumulating a series of physically distinct versions of that work equal to the number of changes made to it, the photographer builds just such an archive simply by photographing.<sup>23</sup>

As anyone who has used a camera should be reminded, this process is essentially a blind one and, initially, a matter of faith: a photograph is, upon exposure, only a latent image (necessarily unviewable, therefore mysterious) until a negative is produced. But even then, that negative represents something that any photographer, no matter how experienced, can only insecurely imagine as he exposes his film; that is (as described earlier), the reduction of the blooming, often febrile, world caught in his camera into a bloodless picture.

Photographers, then, are, in one way or another, always working in the dark, anticipating a state of things while they photograph (a perfect negative of a strong picture) that their procedures seem determined to withhold. At the same time, the fact of being out in the world, all eyes, pressed by the ambient torque of life and landscape, creates its own urgent tides: in a recent interview, when asked what led him to make his pictures for *The New West*, Adams quickly answered “pleasure,” but then went on to add, “I remember once at the end of a long summer day of picture taking I found myself so exhausted from trying to record the last light over the suburbs that I couldn’t work the camera. When would the light ever be that way again, I thought.”<sup>24</sup>

Given all of this, it could be argued that making photographs is as instinctive and nearly as blind a process as anything a poet or artist undertakes in the face of a blank sheet of paper or canvas. While Robert Adams’s 5,000 negatives can accurately be said to represent an equal number of attempts on his part to take the measure of his chosen subject-world, that number fails to suggest either the specific charge of perception that prompted even a single one of those attempts to be tried, or the baggier quantities of gamble or play that surely touched the trying of all of them. The wonder, then, is not that Adams took so many photographs;<sup>25</sup> it is that he made so many strong ones. This was a matter not of odds, but of his fervent need to reveal his

subject, his gift for lucid picture-making, and, no less importantly, his rare understanding of the limitations and satisfactions attending the photographic process just outlined here.

IN 1973, WITH THE GUGGENHEIM PROJECT, Adams had begun to use a Pentax 6 x 7 cm reflex camera in order to utilize a more rectangular frame for exterior photographs and landscapes. This camera became his workhorse, with his square-format, and less obtrusive, machines (which now included a Hasselblad) reserved for interior pictures and their often human subjects. Adams felt he had exhausted the possibilities of the square in *The New West* by the time he finished the photography for it, and there is no question that the wider stage of the pictures making up most of *denver* and *What We Bought* is open to a light now free to sweep in from the wings, and not just from directly overhead (figure 3). (It also seems to be more varied and often less brilliant than the light ruling *The New West*, in keeping with Adams’s observation that Denver’s air, even a mile above sea level, was, because of its greater pollution, a denser obstacle to it.) Consistent with the sense of engrossing air, these photographs also describe a world that, rather than being boxed in by the pictures’ borders, seems to stretch beyond them (figure 4).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, *denver* looks back to *The New West* for its structure and meaning, not difficult to understand as it must have been edited and designed in 1975 – 76, shortly after *The New West* was published. Both books, for example, are divided into chapters with section titles, divisions that, in *The New West*, Adams emphasizes with short pieces of prose commentary and, in *denver*, with a dozen explanatory captions for individual plates at the end of the book. In addition, these chapters track in roughly parallel ways, moving from the prairie to homes (whether trailers, tract houses, or suburban developments) to urban areas (city views, shopping centers, and commercial strips) and back out to “Foothills” and “Mountains” to finish *The New West*, and “Roads” and “Agricultural Land in the Path of Development” to close *denver*. The principal distinction between the books, beyond the difference of camera format, is one of content: with the exception of a single plate, none of the photographs included in *The New West* was made in an interior space; *denver*, on the other hand, includes, of its ninety-three plates, thirteen interiors.<sup>26</sup>

Like these two books, the sequencing of *What We Bought* describes a journey that passes from grassland toward the city (but resisting its center) and then back out again to, in this book, a beautiful group of dusk and night photographs made in the suburbs. But, because *What We Bought* dispenses with text, the shape of this journey is imbedded in the deliberate, unbroken passage that the reader makes trailing the pictures from place to place as Adams invents his Denver (figures 5 – 9).

Adams most clearly distinguishes *What We Bought* from his two earlier books by significantly increasing the number of photographs devoted to studies of commercial spaces, nearly all of them interiors. Fifty-eight plates (two more than the entire number in *The New West*) are images made in stores as well as in factories, offices, and suburban homes, extending the range of Adams's general subject material and allowing a significant human presence to occupy a book of his for the first time.

Adams was not, and has never been (with one exception),<sup>27</sup> concerned with exploring anything resembling the human drama in his photographs; neither his talent, interests, nor ambitions suggest the inclination. For someone who began to write his doctoral dissertation on James Joyce, and who spent a year, in 1976, reading Samuel Johnson, this is interesting to consider, if only as an indication of how rigorously Adams was able to compartmentalize his understanding of photography — specifically as it related to the plainspoken, nominative landscape-style he determined to practice — from that of literature and the pleasures he must have taken from reading so deeply these two vigorous observers of human nature. During the years that he taught, Adams had used Joyce's life-and-kidney-loving Leopold Bloom as an exemplar in his lectures to undergraduates, and had also written an article on Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* and its comic hero, the painter Gully Jimson.<sup>28</sup> But with all of this, his book's citizens are, as Lewis Baltz characterized the small number in *The New West*, “conceived [of] as representatives of a larger category of equally anonymous individuals . . . engaged in activities so banal as to dispel any tendency on our part to particularize [them].”<sup>29</sup>

The few people Adams portrays directly, head-on, in *What We Bought* are young children, invariably sitting alone, as if abandoned (figure 14); adults are viewed from the back or the side or at a distance. Despite this, Adams's inclusion

of these figures, either isolated or bent over desks and assembly lines (figure 10), and stalled, shopping, under banks of fluorescent lights (figure 12), persuasively extends, through the equivalent of the cinematic medium shot, the “photographic survey of the metropolitan area” promised by *denver's* descriptive title. These pictures, along with his studies of underfurnished domestic interiors (figure 11) and detached, straightforward records of store shelves overflowing with white bread, frozen juice, and gimcrack merchandise (figure 13) constitute the heart of the “new world” Adams shows us, a world his suddenly visible pilgrims have seemingly construed for themselves from the things they so laboriously make and casually buy.

Uniquely for Adams, whose writing is known for its conciliating eloquence, *What We Bought: The New World* packs his intentions into a blunt, unambiguous title — one printed, however, only on the spine of the book. Sitting alone in the field of its blood-red dust jacket is a photograph showing the small figure of an out-of-focus man, seen from the back, striding purposefully up to an equally indistinct drive-in restaurant (frontispiece). The picture is framed so haphazardly that the roof of the restaurant is sheared away at the top, offsetting the foreground, which fills two-thirds of the image with nothing more than a grim parcel of dead, flattened grass, sharply focused and belabored by scattered debris and waste paper. This snapshot — a scrub of a photograph, really, in which the very meanings of “focus” and “frame” are twisted back on themselves — looks like something that could have been found tossed away in that same unhappy plot of grass. But for Adams, its glum, photographic clangor seems to have been just the thing<sup>30</sup> he needed to herald his book and the unrealized world it harbors.

It may well be that, by the time he was finally given the opportunity to prepare, and name, this group of half-forgotten photographs, Robert Adams was willing to allow himself a show of some anger, apart from what can be read in the pictures themselves. In any case, *What We Bought* not only belatedly completes the work that Adams had so single-mindedly pursued for six years, but also represents the most realized expression of that work's bitter strength, a perception its title appears to sanction. Adams acknowledges this bitterness, as well as what must have been the mixed feelings associated with having to revisit a twenty-year-old project, by quoting several dour sentences on the page

following the last plate of his book from the poet W.S. Merwin's 1993 preface to work Merwin had completed in 1973, one year short, at both ends, of the years bracketing Adams's parallel experience;<sup>31</sup> and then, on the next page, closing *What We Bought* with the "eschatological *chill*" of "Place," Merwin's 1988 poem, which begins, "On the last day of the world/I would want to plant a tree...."

It is impossible now for even Robert Adams to know on what basis he conducted the triage that resulted in the particular group of photographs that makes up *What We Bought* being consigned to storage for twenty years. He has remarked that *denver* represents "what seemed to work given what I wanted to say." But *denver* itself does not quite give the answer away: if anything, the exterior (and majority of) photographs included in *What We Bought* are, from picture to picture, more vivid than those in *denver* (although the difficulties of judging this book, which is poorly printed, make any such comparison inexact). The principal reason for this seems to be that Adams modeled the book on the photographic surveys produced by nineteenth-century photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, his editing for it emphasizes photographs where "as we see it in early pictures, [space is] not just a matter of long views, but also of distance from people,"<sup>33</sup> thus eliminating all but a relatively small number of the interior photographs he had to select from and draining the book of a good part of its possible force. It is also conceivable, although he has no memory of it, that Adams ruled out the inclusion of any cropped photographs in *denver*: none of the plates in the book appears to be trimmed at all, while, as noted earlier, a good number of those in *What We Bought* deviate slightly from the square and 6 x 7 cm formats that he used on the Guggenheim project.<sup>34</sup> In any case, he has been unhappy about *denver* since it was published, and not only because of the poor printing of the plates. Calling it a "compromised fragment," he also feels the book is confusingly designed (for which he holds himself responsible), moving from blank pages to section titles to single or double spreads in no discernable rhythm or pattern.

ADAMS, IN HIS SUBTITLE FOR *WHAT WE BOUGHT*, calls it a collection of "scenes," an appropriate word for the book, if only because of the way that its human, social dimension colors the inexorable, enlarging effect of disclosure created by the act of studying, in sequence, nearly two

hundred precisely made photographs free of section titles, prose comments, or a design any more elaborate than one-picture-to-a-page (or, in the case of an exhibition, one-picture-after-another). In this long, gripping progression, each plate lives both individually, as Adams had wanted for *denver*, and as a part of the steady parade of evidence that, cumulatively, forms the bill of particulars for Adams's compelling indictment. "[The pictures] document a separation from ourselves, and in turn from the natural world we professed to love," he writes at the end of his brief introduction, and his photographs, both composed and jarred by feeling, gradually work out his proof. Little wonder that the final picture in the book is a square image of a doorway at night, promising, behind the buckled screening, some bit of rest. It, and an earlier plate of the same door photographed at mid-day, were made in Longmont, at Adams's modest home (figure 15).<sup>35</sup>

Many recent artists have used photography, and its gift for implacable description, to manufacture compendious, if opaque, taxonomies of the physical world, from Ed Ruscha's deadpan iterations of gas stations and swimming pools and Bernd and Hilla Becher's studies of vernacular architecture to Gerhard Richter's encyclopedic "Atlas." *What We Bought* gathers its facts, too, in a manner superficially resembling that of these works and others like them. But it also succeeds in making palpable Adams's passion for what has been abused and lost by the sorry world he so methodically examines. It is as if Adams himself is sorry and even embarrassed to speak of this loss, and that the burden requires him to temper the harsh truths he feels compelled to report by standing back, away from the evidence. Accurate or not as this may be, it is undeniable that, with *What We Bought*, Adams manages something extraordinary, creating a body of photographs that speaks ardently about its subject, even as it remorselessly catalogues it.<sup>36</sup>

This rare conjunction of sympathy and dispassion is nowhere else expressed so powerfully in Adams's remarkable career as it is in the work he made during this period. And that power was quickly recognized: more than any of his books, *The New West* exerted a practice-shifting influence on other photographers, one that could be observed soon after its publication and traced even up to today. This was first demonstrated as early as 1975, the year after the book was published, in *New Topographics*:

*Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, a exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester that included Adams's pictures as well as those of Lewis Baltz, the Bechers, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel, Jr.<sup>37</sup> More recently, an example of the book's reach can be found in the work of the contemporary German photographer Andreas Gursky, whose mammoth color photographs — in physical appearance everything that Adams's small black-and-white prints are not — dilate on the general subject of material culture in the spare presentation-style that Adams's work defined so persuasively more than twenty-five years ago.<sup>38</sup>

The most eloquent issue of *The New West*, however, is Adams's own *What We Bought*, worked out on the heels of the earlier book, and fully realizing his dream of the "vast, enormous" project he hoped to create — and did — two decades before he rediscovered it. Having seen it exhibited in its entirety in a New York gallery, I think it can be argued that, so many years after it was made, it remains a vital, complex, and moving work of art. The histories of American photography and American art must, by acknowledging its presence, be changed by it, now that it has come to light.

1. This purchase was spurred after Jock Reynolds, the direct of the Gallery, saw the work in San Francisco in 1997, the first time that *What We Bought* had been publicly shown following its initial exhibition two years earlier.

2. I am deeply grateful to Robert Adams for providing me with such a complete, and graciously given, account of the genesis of *What We Bought*, as well as the two other books and bodies of work discussed in this article. I particularly appreciate his willingness to describe his technical and editing procedures so thoroughly, a form of information that, it seems to me, is as essential as it is rare for understanding how artists in general physically produce their work. (A case in point arguing for the importance of this kind of data, and, whenever possible, of obtaining it in the first person: *Secret Knowledge*, David Hockney's recently published attempt to pin down by visual examination the ways in which Carravaggio, Vermeer, Ingres, and other painters may have used mirrors, lenses, and devices like the camera lucida to help generate their work.)

3. Adams, born in New Jersey, moved with his family from Madison, Wisconsin, to Denver when he was fifteen. He lived there for four years until entering the University of Redlands in 1956 and then, three years later, taking up postgraduate study at the University of Southern California.

4. Adams has pointed out that a picture of a "Frontier" gas station included in *The New West* was, almost immediately, a record of a lost structure: less than three weeks after he photographed it, the building was destroyed.

5. For a description of this technique, and one that takes into account Adams's incidental use of the low, or "bass," end of the photographic tonal scale, see note 37.

6. Robert Adams, introduction, *The American Space: Meaning in Nineteenth-Century Landscape Photography*, ed. Daniel Wolf (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 8.

7. Ibid. Adams's deployment of the 4 x 5" view camera is as fluid and eloquent in *From the Missouri West* as it is homespun in *White Churches of the Plains*, a magnitude of change that would have been unlikely without his study of O'Sullivan's work — and the half-dozen years he put in using the smaller, more maneuverable, hand cameras he employed between 1968 and 1974.

8. Lewis Baltz, book review, "The New West," *Art in America* (March/April 1975): 41, 43. This is a particularly cogent review of Adams's book. It also suggests that Baltz's own *Park City*, produced after he wrote this article (and the other major photographic project recently purchased by the Gallery), benefited from Baltz's thinking about *The New West*.

9. Adams's *White Churches of the Plains* inevitably calls up Evans's images of vernacular architecture, particularly his powerful pictures of African American churches, three of which Evans included in *American Photographs*.

10. Some of the most surprising, previously unpublished, photographs in the 1971 Evans retrospective at MoMA were those he made of street debris. It is doubtful that Adams knew this work, even in 1973, but the frontispiece illustration introducing this article, for example, resonates with the spirit of these strange, challenging photographs of Evans's.

11. In general, ambitious photographers learn a good deal about making their own pictures by looking at those of other photographers (a truth the late Ernst Gombrich demonstrated about art-making in general in his indispensable *Art and Illusion*). Consider, for example, the three major Americans included in the MoMA exhibition mentioned earlier in this article: Garry Winogrand's work, as he acknowledged, grew out of his reading of Evans's and Robert Frank's photographs; Diane Arbus transmogrified the often bizarre worlds she recognized in the work of Brassai, Weegee, and her teacher, Lisette Model, into her own parallel universe, one defined by its intense psychological sympathies; and Lee Friedlander has, at

different points throughout his long, brilliant career, improvised inspired riffs on the photographs of predecessors ranging from Eugene Atget and Lewis Hine to Edward Weston and Evans.

Given his demurrals about the possible effect of Evans's work on his own, Robert Adams would seem to have had no comparable masters, at least not in 1968. While, as the text emphasizes, he took something important from Timothy O'Sullivan — and, Adams has said, also from Dorothea Lange — related to how the light of the western plains might be described in his photographs, it is difficult to credit his having learned anything from O'Sullivan or Lange clearly related to the picture-making style of the work he started to produce at this time, at least in the sense that one can credit the photographers mentioned in the last paragraph with having absorbed such lessons from their predecessors. It is also interesting that Adams, who, in his writings on nineteenth-century photographs, stresses how the description of space is central to the meanings of those pictures, turned at this point to a square-format camera, one notoriously difficult to use for suggesting a long, visually engaging, view. This could be interpreted as a possible indication of how disposed he might have been when he began this project, and his life as an independent artist, to invent his work, and West, from scratch — and, by extension, to create it as free as he could of any previous authority, including Timothy O'Sullivan.

In any event, Adams's possible relation to his predecessors at this first stage of his career is a rich subject for speculation. A conventional critic, for example, could argue that Adams's brilliant reading of nineteenth-century landscape photography provided the basis for his work, and leave the issue at that. While a (Harold) Bloomian might invoke the "anxiety of influence" to make the case that, by acknowledging predecessors like O'Sullivan and Lange (and even Edward Weston), whose photographs were not directly reflected in his own other than by sharing a general quality having to do with how the light looked in them, Adams managed, consciously or not, to deflect the nature of the specific lessons — whether about picture-structures or subject matter — that he may have learned from the strongest apparent candidate for such influence, Walker Evans. The point here is that, because Adams's work of this period proved to be so centrally important, and was apparently so unprecedented, accounts other than the one outlined in the text — which suggests that his pictures were created out of little more than Adams's fierce understanding of photography's genius for uninflected description — can only nourish the question of how he came to make this work in the surprising way that he did, even though these alternative explanations are, for now, inadequate.

Along these general lines, it is worth mentioning a 1977 lecture that Adams gave at the International Center for Photography, where he stated that when he began to photograph for *The New West*, "a suggestion I'd read by Dorothea Lange was uppermost in my mind. She had called for the building of a file about

'the life of the American people in the 1960s, with particular emphasis on urban and suburban life.' It should, she said, 'be concentrated on what exists and prevails.'" (Quoted in *To Make It Home* [New York, Aperture, 1989], 168.) Although this might seem to contradict the view that Lange et al. had little tangible effect on Adams's work at this time, it is arguable that her broad recommendations would have been relatively unimportant to him without his owning some internal image of what the pictures he wanted to make might look like, something that Evans, again, much more than Lange, could have afforded Adams through his (Evans's) photographs. But that circles back to the initial point addressed in this footnote about photographers and how they learn from photographs — a form of learning that Robert Adams might well have used only sparingly.

12. Adams gave up his life as an academic in 1970, only five years after receiving his Ph.D. That same year, he moved to the Denver area, where his wife earned a master's degree in library science and was soon providing the major portion of their household income.

13. A few years later, as the war continued, and at about the time he had finished his photography for *The New West*, Adams and his wife considered emigrating, and opened a bank account in Europe as a first step to making that possible.

14. "Whatever power there is in the urban pictures is bound to the closeness with which they skirt banality. For a shot to be good — suggestive of more than just what it is — it has to come perilously near being bad, just a view of stuff." From notes Robert Adams wrote in 1970. Ibid.

15. Robert Adams, Introduction. *Denver* (Boulder, Colo.: Colorado Associated University Press, 1977), unpaginated.

16. *To Make It Home*, 168.

17. John Szarkowski, the director of the Department of Photography at MoMA, supported the purchase of this work and later wrote the introduction to *The New West*, a text that Adams says was crucial for getting the book published.

18. The arithmetic, though inexact, is revealing: Adams spent well over three hundred hours developing this film, not including the time spent preparing chemistry.

19. All but three of the 193 prints in the Gallery's collection were made at this time and show a black line on the mat. One of those three happens to be reproduced here as figure 4.

20. *To Make It Home*, 169.

21. The photographic process described here and throughout this article is of course the analog process (black-and-white division) that photographers employed thirty years ago and, less universally, but, in many cases, continue to use today. Needless to say, the figure of the photographer portrayed here is also an analog type, working *sans* digital camera, *sans* computer, *sans* Photoshop, and, incidentally, despite the intrusive pronouns “he” and “his,” *sans* specific gender.

22. W.H. Auden, “Writing,” *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 23.

23. This kind of ad hoc archive-making is of course at the heart of the photographic process. It could be said that the nearly three hundred prints Adams pulled out from under his worktable twenty years after he made them composed a kind of study collection pared down from the larger research file of 5,000 negatives he had produced in 1973 – 74, a collection that, like any researcher studying the past, he would have understood at a remove — and with distinctly different perceptions than those he had when he was actively producing the work.

24. From an interview in the second edition of *The New West* (Cologne, Germany, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2000), xxvi.

25. Adams’s “numbers” are, in fact, extraordinarily efficient: he made one finished print for about every thirteen negatives he exposed, while his ratio of pictures used in either *denver* or *What We Bought* compared to the approximately 5,000 he made in all was about 1:17. This is as high a percentage of “hits” as many view camera photographers achieve, despite the deliberation that their process necessarily imposes on them.

26. These are all in a square format, suggesting, as Adams has confirmed, that a number of them were made when he was working on *The New West*, and thus explaining the four-year span he gives for the production of *What We Bought* in its subtitle, 1970 – 1974.

27. Robert Adams, *Our Lives & Our Children: Photographs Taken Near the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant* (Aperture: New York, 1983). This is a collection of pictures that Adams apparently made by literally photographing from the hip.

28. By the time he left teaching (and as he was working on *The New West*), Adams had effectively given up reading fiction for poetry. This dismissal is in line with other decisions he made during this period, for, like them, it supported his undeviating concentration on his work and its related concerns; in this case, the unadorned, condensed style he adopted for making his pictures. Unsurprisingly, the poets he quotes and alludes to in his books are, preponderantly,

Americans who write in the unembellished manner Adams brings to his photography.

29. Baltz, “The New West,” 43.

30. And just about the *only* thing: with one exception (*WWB* 44), this plate represents the single instance in *What We Bought* where a camera, rather than an eye deliberately guiding it, gives the illusion of having been the agency responsible for making the picture. Given that, Adams’s wordless cover can be seen not only as a representation of the “new world” his book so powerfully constructs, but also as an homage to the raw descriptive energy of photography itself and its genius for conjuring up the uncanny pictures that materialize willy-nilly on contact sheets to surprise, and teach, photographers.

31. Merwin’s first sentences read: “The current of the news ... has done nothing to brighten my view of history and where it is heading. Quite the contrary, perhaps, as cruelty, polymorphous nihilism, and organized obliteration have accelerated, and with them the racing disintegration of the entire evolutionary structure in which we are privileged still to exist.”

32. “Mark Tobey said that one ought ‘to name one’s master’s name. What have you got,’ he asked, ‘if you’ve just got yourself?’ So, here’s to O’Sullivan ....” Adams wrote this in 1978, the year following the publication of *denver* and at about the time he had finished the photography for *From the Missouri West*. Notes, 1978, *To Make It Home*, 170.

33. *The American Space*, 4.

34. Adams has always been willing to crop his negatives slightly to make them stronger. The fact is, however, that each plate in *denver* measures to either of the two ratios of camera format that he used to produce the book.

35. These two are the only square photographs in *What We Bought* that are not interiors. Given their meaning to Adams, however, they can be read that way, in the sense that anyone’s own front door represents the welcoming border of home and private life. Although there are no captions to indicate Adams’s proprietary relation to these photographs, the fact that, as a class of picture, they are unique in the book, and that he photographs this door twice — at the heart and the end of the day — distinguishes them. He also cues their autographic content not only by using the night photograph to close his book, but also by employing a print of it that appears marked by the photographer’s unique, if accidental, seal, his fingerprint.

36. It is possible that *What We Bought* owes something of its catalog-like design to books published by the artists mentioned earlier in this paragraph, although, while he was making his

Guggenheim photographs in 1973 – 74, Adams was unaware of them and their work.

37. Using the catalog of this exhibition as a rough guide, it appears that Deal's and Gohlke's square photographs and Nixon's elevated views of the Boston area may have been informed by Adams's work. Interestingly, Wessel's pictures, which were made earlier than Adams's, describe the bright light of the West as it would register to an eye that had adjusted to it, showing detail both in the low, or shadow, end of the photographic gray scale as well as in the brightest tones. Adams's photographs, on the other hand, suggest the first, squinting glance taken at an object cast in bright light, one where neither deep shadows nor white walls, for example, can be adequately read. Technically, Wessel manipulated the exposure and development of his *film* in order to compress the tonal range in his photographs, retaining detail at both ends of that range, but at the cost of contrast (which he obviously considered no cost at all) and some separation of tone. Adams effectively reversed these procedures, exposing and developing his film normally as a way to emphasize the separations of tone in his negatives, and then manipulating his *printing* to further emphasize the contrast of these separations, particularly at the lowest and highest ends of the tonal scale. Figure 1 provides a good example of this technique.

38. In his introduction to a monograph on Gursky, Peter Galassi points out that the German photographer Michael Schmidt, who admired Adams's work and showed it to his students, taught Gursky in the 1970s. Peter Galassi, Introduction, *Andreas Gursky* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 13.