

*New Jersey as Non-Site***Kelly Baum****Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2013****176 pages****\$40.00****ISBN: 978-0300174373****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i2.95>**

What is the relationship between art and place? Does where an artist live or works affect her art? How do we understand that relationship? In *New Jersey as Non-Site*, the richly detailed exhibition catalogue for the “New Jersey as Non-Site” exhibition that took place at the Princeton University Art Museum in 2013 and 2014, curator Kelly Baum explores these questions with regard to the avant garde visual artists, sculptors, and writers that called New Jersey home after World War II. The book asserts a contradictory relationship between the edge-pushing art produced by Allan Kaprow, Amiri Baraka, Nancy Holt, George Segal, and others, between 1952 and 1976. On one hand, these artists saw New Jersey only through its relationship with what it was not, particularly New York City. On the other, they utilized the state’s highways, industrial relics, rural areas, and cities as laboratories to think through how to create art outside of the studio, fundamentally changing artistic practice in painting, photography, sculpture, and performance.

The post-World War II story of New Jersey is singularly well known, perhaps because it represented the paradigmatic story of suburbanization. In 1951, the first fifty-three miles of the New Jersey Turnpike opened. By 1958, developer William Levitt was selling houses in his third Levittown suburban development in the Burlington County community of Willingboro. Federally-funded highways made it possible for white families, often with help from the GI Bill, to move out of congested cities and into these segregated suburbs located in easy commuting distance of New York or Philadelphia. Alongside these gleaming spaces, certain industries boomed. RCA built a new headquarters in Cherry Hill in 1954 while the Ford Motor Company built its largest auto

manufacturing plant in Mahwah in 1955. This growth was accompanied by decay in the state's oldest industries, like ceramics and mining. For the artists surveyed in *New Jersey As Non-Site*, New Jersey was a place of productive tensions, where the Turnpike whizzed through cities like Newark with deep histories, past decrepit industrial buildings, and over areas of seemingly untouched nature to arrive in brand-new suburban developments that were supposed to represent the future of the state and nation.

As Baum argues, New Jersey's mid-century avant garde was defined by three "curiosities:" cooperation, ruin and liminality (p. 13). With Rutgers University serving as a hub, several artists worked with each other to explore the state, as with Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson's road trips, or in Allan Kaprow's "happenings," improvisatory events where lines between audience and performer were blurred, that first took place in New Brunswick in 1958 (p. 19). Beyond New Jersey being a place where artists worked together, an "affective geography of desolation" which saw ruins as resonant with meaning and fecundity, shaped the work they produced (p. 28). Instead of depicting the postcard beauty of a Jersey shore sunset, artists like Gordon Matta-Clark sought out dereliction in his 1974 piece *Splitting* in which he took an empty house owned by an acquaintance in Englewood and carefully cut it in half. The project was filmed and photographed. By destroying the house, Matta-Clark countered the logic of suburban development. Yet, missing from his work is an acknowledgement of specific social contexts, including that the final residents were an African-American family who had been evicted. *Splitting* saw the house as a symbol of suburbia rather than as part of a complex racially-driven political and social milieu. Finally, artists saw New Jersey as a liminal state, more defined by its being in-between bigger, more well-known places than as a place with its own identity. Roads and travel inspired artists like George Segal

who photographed Route One and the Turnpike and Nancy Holt's 1975 film *Pine Barrens*, much of which was shot through a moving car's window.

New Jersey as Non-Site is a fascinating exploration of New Jersey's role in postwar avant garde art. In addition to the excellent essay that opens the volume, which explores themes of place and placelessness, there is the transcript of a moderated conversation between Baum and four Princeton faculty members, Beatriz Colomina, Hal Foster, William Gleason and Hendrik Hartog, a timeline, and further resources.¹ Much of the book is the exhibition catalogue, an extraordinary resource for anyone interested in art in this era. The only misstep in *New Jersey as Non-Site* is its dealing with race. Poet, founder of the Black Arts Movement, and activist Amiri Baraka is included, but his work, which focused on creating a politically and socially responsive art and identifying a unique African American aesthetic, is quite different from the other artists included, even if his living and working in Newark is critical to the work he created. The avant garde was a white (and, to a lesser degree) male movement. Rather than facing its whiteness directly, by forcing Amiri Baraka's poetry, performance and playwriting into the same category as George Segal or Allan Kaprow it actually highlights the differences between these very different kinds of artists. Nonetheless, *New Jersey as Non-Site* is a worthwhile addition that adds to our understanding of New Jersey's role in postwar art movements.

Mary Rizzo
Rutgers University- Newark

¹ The exhibition website includes a timeline, map and other materials, see <http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/njs/exhibition> .