THE LIVES OF FORM:
FROM ZHANG JIN TO AARON SISKIND

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for Andrew F. Jones

Consider pictures by three contemporary Chinese photographers, each of which engages with organic and inorganic forms between abstraction and figuration by means of an aesthetic of flatness and surface. In *Another Season* (You Yi Ji) (2010-2013), Zhang Jin focuses on the entanglements of human artifacts and natural forms, nomadism and ecology of the remote past as well as of contemporary life as they both emerge from and shape the present-day landscapes of China's far northwest. Zhang connects the aesthetic of his black and white photographs which, he says in an interview with the Chinese edition of *Artforum*, negotiates "between abstraction and figuration," to their depictions of objects and patterns in the landscapes of the Silk Road, the global trade route of the past that had connected China to India, Central Asia, and Europe.[1] "Most of the many objects on the Silk Road," such as the "Wordless Stele" (Wuzi Bei) depicted in Zhang's eponymous photograph of 2011 (figure 1), "are no longer in the geographical positions they were in during the Han and Tang dynasties, they had been moved all over the place in later generations. With this migration of position and loss of their own functionality, static objects became homeless pastoral nomads."[2] Crucially, Zhang Jin's description of his work draws together the nomad and migrant, object and landscape, through an interplay of abstraction and figuration—the meaning of its images of nature as historical, of nature as process and form, becoming clear, the critic Cao Liangbin writes, if placed in the context of China's economic development.[3]

Zhang Jin is one of a number of photographers currently at work in China who, despite their distinct differences, have in common a conception of the emergent forms of surfaces—whether surfaces depicted in a photograph, the surface of a photograph itself, or an interplay of both—as constituting ecologies: interactions of animate and inanimate

matter, objects, spaces, and markings critical to rethinking relations among human, non-human, and environment (figures 2 and 3). The stakes of their work lie in their picturing of ecologies and of environmental crisis by means of formalist aesthetics of abstraction, and in the question of how and why such an aesthetic urges a re-evaluation of ecology as itself constituted of relationships of form and surface.

Yu Huaqiang's explicit aim in his series, *Water, Death* (Shui, Shang) (2004), is to depict the pollution of an ecosystem. Each photograph in the series follows the same compositional scheme of depicting at the center of a square image decaying animal corpses (figure 4), human-made trash sprouting with life (figure 5), and other detritus floating at the surface of a dying body of water in the Jiangnan region of southeast China. Yu's use of black and white film and a flat composition at first seem simply to collapse together the monochrome of his photographs' surfaces with the grey surface of the depicted body of water. But what makes the water's surface appear opaque are its actual murky, polluted depths so that, as Yu composes his photographs, depth *is* surface, or rather, the water as it appears in his photographs is at once all depth and depthless. Given how the figures of a corpse and trash here and in other photographs appear to both float and submerge into the watery pictorial ground, in Yu's photographs surface becomes a verb—surfacing— a process of emergence and dissolving of figure and ground that pictures the process of polluting itself.

In *disCONNEXION* (2002-2003), Xing Danwen photographs e-trash: discarded electronic, computer, and communications equipment exported from the West, South Korea, and Japan to the southern coastal region of China (figure 6). Xing's film photographs indicate the intersection between the global routes of e-trash—the material base of digital and internet culture—on the one hand, and on the other, the specific environmental and social conditions of over 100,000 people from Guangdong Province and migrant workers from western China, whose livelihood is to recycle it.[4] My interest here is in Xing's mode of depicting in her color photographs innumerable entangled cords, wires, chips and parts—

what she describes as "vast piles of dead and deconstructed machines"—by spatially compressing them against the picture plane and cropping them so that, as Richard Vine puts it, "their 'found' compositions [exhibit] a kind of Ab[stract]-Ex[pressionist] sublimity."[5] Xing writes in her statement on the work that "the aesthetic beauty of…imagery [that] almost transports the photographed objects from their social and economic context" becomes a crucial strategy for addressing the forces of "modernization and globalization…under the influence of Western modernity" that are, she continues, "complicit in creating the environmental and social nightmare experienced in remote corners of China"—confronting, that is, environmental degradation with an aesthetic of abstraction "to sketch a visual representation of 21st-century modernity."[6]

Numerous contemporary Chinese photographers are keenly attuned to questions of surface, form and life, and of how through such attunement their work can picture organic and inorganic forms of ecosystems as systems of meaningful and relational configurations. When Xing Danwen's photographs transform e-trash and their terrible economy into pictorial abstractions, or Yu Huaqiang pictures animate forms decaying into bodies of water as inanimate forms sprouting with life, what, we might ask, are the larger structures—the histories, the ecosystems—of which these formal relationships are the expression? How indeed can one hope to picture forces as large and abstract as an economy, a history, an ecosystem, an environment? If such forces are not visually representable, is it not because they are also forms both visible in and emergent from the materiality of the kinds of objects, their movements and placement, their weathering, growth and decay, such photographs depict?

Zhang Jin's entire body of work to date manifests an ongoing preoccupation with such questions. In *Ant Crossing River* (Mayi guo he) (2014), Zhang used X-ray sheet film in place of gelatin silver photographic paper to photograph plants, which as a result, Zhang writes, appear as if they were "human veins or cells under a high-power microscope." By making visible such fractal forms transposable from the structures of plants to that of the

circulatory system, *Ant Crossing River* offers a "transformation in the manner of viewing plants" that, as Zhang puts it, "indicates the vertical relation between person and world."[7] And in 2013, when Zhang, who holds a Ph.D. in chemistry from the Polytechnic Institute of New York University, produced a series of photographs, *Broken Flowers*, of the visible signs of the corrosion of plants by lower-atmosphere ozone formed of chemicals emitted from fossil fuel combustion, he wrote of the "symbiotic wounds on the flowers [that] also locally affect the surrounding environment and human bodies."[8] Both of these projects shed light on the earlier project whose logic they extend, namely, Zhang's exploration of the traces of how humans make environments and environments make humans across historical time in *Another Season*.[9] In interviews, Zhang frequently sums up what links together this project's diverse photographs of entanglements of historical traces and natural scenes with the phrase, "life flows and circulates, grasses and trees wither and flourish" (*shengming liudong, caomu ku rong*).[10] He makes explicit the stakes of this poetic turn of phrase's linkage of biological processes and cycles of ecological change when he describes his technique of engaging photographically with "northwest [China], its poverty, and its perplexing environmental problems" as one of eschewing explicit critique or description in favor of what Zhang calls a "method of the 'latent' " (or "hidden," *yin*), in which he eliminates obvious symbols of historical era and instead attends to the withering and flourishing of grasses and trees, one season after another.[11]

In this essay, I want to pursue a connection Zhang Jin suggests in the *Artforum* interview, one which, as I will show, is highly suggestive of how we might think pictorially the forms of ecology and the ecology of form—or indeed, ecology itself as form. Zhang enters into his discussion of the environment and history of the landscapes *Another Season* depicts by invoking the problem of "flatness" in modernist painting and "the many experiments carried out by photographic artists in China and abroad with the compression of space, the weakening of perspective, and the cancelling of the illusion of three dimensionality."[12] In so doing, Zhang brings into this context the art critic Clement

Greenberg's writing on formalism and abstract painting, in particular Greenberg's emphasis on flatness as integral to a pictorial medium; Zhang's reference to photographers outside China experimenting with pictorial flatness seems to indicate, among others, the figure perhaps most crucial to establishing this aesthetic in photography, namely, Aaron Siskind (figure 7).[13] In his classic 1940 essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," Greenberg identified what he called "the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through' it for realistic perspectival space, and went on to stress "line" as "one of the most abstract elements in painting since it is never found in nature as the definition of a contour," as well as how "under the influence of the square shape of the canvas, forms tend to become geometrical."[14] Within a few years of Greenberg's essay, Siskind began to explore such an aesthetic in his photography; indeed, Elaine de Kooning later called attention to the relationships between Siskind's photographs and the kinds of abstract paintings Greenberg would be central to theorizing and promoting.[15] "I accept the flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture," Siskind would later write, in an apparent echo of Greenberg's text. In contrast to Greenberg's insistence on line as "one of the most abstract elements in painting since it is never found in nature," however, Siskind's discussion of "the picture" leads from objects to the abstract shapes that emerge from them through an entangled array of natural and human-made materials in which "rocks are sculptured forms; a section of common decorative iron-work, springing rhythmic shapes; [and] fragments of paper sticking to a wall, a conversation piece," before declaring that "these forms, totems, masks, figures, shapes, images must finally take their place in the tonal field of the picture and strictly conform to their space environment."[16]

While one can catch a distinct whiff of Greenberg's and Siskind's rhetoric in Zhang's own terms and see how an aesthetic of flatness, line and contour, the geometric and surface plays out in the "space environments" of Zhang's and Xing's and Yu's pictures, I want to suggest that there is at work here something more than a matter of resemblance or connection. The conjunction the work of these Chinese photographers proposes between

their own practice and a moment in the history of abstraction from the middle of the twentieth century brings into focus and calls into the present an alternative possibility within that history: one of formalism as a mode of picturing (and not necessarily representing) nature and the environment at a moment of crisis. Taken together, these two historically and culturally disparate moments of photographic formalism constitute a dialectical image, one might say. "A past," that is, as Walter Benjamin wrote in the same fateful year in which Greenberg traced his history of the flattening of the picture plane, that "can only be seized as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability…an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image."[17] An image in which not only does a re-discovered past inspire the present through such recognition, but in which the present brings to visibility and reconfigures a moment of the past as a critical possibility, which had always been present yet always latent. My aim in the present essay is thus to juxtapose the work of Xing and Yu and in particular, Zhang, with Siskind's postwar photography in order to (re)construct the conception of form and its earlier critical discourse their work provokes. For, I will claim, to consider the work and thinking of contemporary Chinese photographers provokes us to see a previous moment of American formalism anew as embedded in modernist conceptions of nature and the environment; and that, furthermore, such a re-imagined moment illuminates the formal and ecological stakes of contemporary Chinese photography.

Now, to make visible an ecological politics of formalism is to run counter to a long-standing critique in postmodern theories of photography of the presumed split between form and politics in the postwar era—particularly in Siskind's later work. At times, Siskind himself called attention to how his photographs' formalism divorced what they depict from their geographical, cultural, environmental, and political contexts. In an interview from late in his life, for instance, Siskind called attention to a picture he had made in Peru in 1981 of a letter that was part of a name on a wall that, in the context of a political struggle, had been overwritten to the point of illegibility, and remarked that what fascinated him was that the

letter "became just a shape, an intriguing, beautiful shape, which has nothing to do with the political motivations that resulted in the shape. I made the shape float in that area, divorcing it from other things which surrounded it."[18] Such sentiments have made Siskind, in Abigail Solomon-Godeau's seminal critique, the emblematic figure of what she argued was the disengagement of radical formalism in photography from social or political realities after WWII—a shift "signaled in Siskind's zealous embrace and assimilation of Clement Greenberg's doxology of modernism."[19] What Siskind himself referred to in an interview Solomon-Godeau cites as the "absolute belief" of the abstract expressionist painters Greenberg favored "that the canvas is the complete total area of struggle"—a belief that, Siskind went on to claim, "reassured" him in his "work on a flat plane, because then you don't get references immediately to nature"—is a sign of what Solomon-Godeau scathingly (and not without justification) calls a "macho posturing," a "heroicizing of self-expression…so extreme as to border on the parodic."[20]

It is clearly a critical commonplace that Greenberg's critical coordinates may orient our understanding of Siskind's abstract photography and its emphasis on the flat, depthless picture plane—whether this connection is seen as neutral or salutary, as in Elaine de Kooning's account, or whether it is seen as deleterious, a marker of and explanation for Siskind's apparent withdrawal from history and politics, as in Solomon-Godeau's account. And yet both such accounts leave out too much: about Greenberg, about Siskind's rhetoric and photographs, and most of all, about our understanding of what formal abstraction has been thought to do and to be in relation to nature. Indeed, the force of Solomon-Godeau's critique depends upon assuming that engaging with politics and attending to natural forms are clearly opposed. As Siskind opined, however, in an interview from 1984, the year after Solomon-Godeau's essay first appeared, "I am in contact with the world in my way, but in order to make contact with that world while I'm working, I have to remove myself from the world of events. When you're making a picture, you have to be alone with what you're making the picture with. You're having a conversation with that stuff, you see?"[21] In the

present day Xing Danwen seems to echo Siskind's claim when she writes that "the aesthetic beauty" of her images of e-trash dismantled and recycled by migrant laborers and their evocation of abstract expressionist painting "almost transports the photographed objects from their social and economic context." But perhaps the vehemence of the word, "almost," in her statement should give us pause.[22] Is pictorial decontextualization—or by photographic means "almost" transporting objects from their social, economic, political, historical, and indeed environmental contexts—necessarily or always a form of depoliticization? Or is it a matter of decontextualization at all, but rather a making visible of the contexts in which those objects are entangled, or from which they emerge, or indeed which they form, by means of what Siskind called the "space environment" of the picture plane? Might the practices embodied in all of these photographs by Xing, Yu, Zhang and Siskind and the conversations with the stuff of which they are made (if not always the rhetoric in which they are embedded) ask us to reconsider what we mean by the politics of form? And if so, might the "almost" be the trace of how a form is emergent from, dependent upon, and even an actant upon its milieu?

For a start, the accounts I have mentioned connecting Siskind's photographic abstraction to Greenbergian formalism all leave out a crucial fact: Greenberg seems to have detested Siskind's work, and on highly telling grounds. On the occasion of Siskind's first show at the Charles Egan Gallery in New York in 1948 in an exhibition that also featured work by Robert Rauschenberg and de Kooning, "Greenberg insisted to Siskind that he couldn't do that with photography, photography had to be anecdotal, to tell a story."[23] Just what one "couldn't do" with photography Greenberg had elaborated upon two years previously in a review of an exhibition of Edward Weston's photographs. In a characteristic series of move, Greenberg declares that photography, like any other medium, in his judgment, must "be completely true to itself," he defines single-handedly just what the characteristics and boundaries of the photographic medium are, and then he vehemently objects to the work of artists that transgress those boundaries.[24] If, for Greenberg, avant-

garde painting is characterized by the resistance of its medium, the denial of perspectival space, the flattening of the picture plane, and the abstraction of line, as he had declared in "Towards a Newer Laocoön," as well as a reduction of its subject matter to "impersonal still life or landscape" or pure abstraction, as he adds in the Weston review, then photography "achieves its maximum effect through naturalism" and putting "all emphasis on an explicit subject, anecdote, or message."[25] For photography to emulate "the abstract or impersonal arrangements of modern painting," however, is to not "be completely true to itself."[26] The fatal flaw in Weston's photography, for Greenberg, is that "his camera defines everything, but it defines everything in the same way—and an excess of detailed information ends by making everything look as though it were made of the same substance, no matter how varied the surfaces. The human subjects of Weston's portraits seem to me for the most part as inanimate as his root or rock or sand forms."[27] Furthermore, "Weston tries to achieve decorative unity…by arranging his subject in geometrical or quasi-geometrical patterns, but these preserve a superimposed, inorganic quality."[28] Conversely, for Greenberg a painting's picture plane and formal organization should be geometric; Georgia O'Keefe's biomorphic paintings were thus, Greenberg wrote, "little more than tinted photography."[29] At stake in Greenberg's dislike of Siskind and Weston's work, then, is not only his stricture that photographers should not emulate the abstract arrangements of modern painting, but also his apparent abhorrence of an abstraction that is biomorphic, an organic formalism. Hence given that, in his estimation, photography should be naturalistic not abstract, he chastises Weston for the "geometrical or quasi-geometrical patterns" and "inorganic quality" of his work, or even an apparent confusion of the organic and inorganic in which "a cow against a barn looks like a fossilized replica of itself; a nude becomes continuous with sand"—in short, a sort of photographic monism that makes "everything look as though it were made of the same substance."[30]

Now, the terms with which Greenberg mounts his arguments had already been set, by and large, by Alfred H. Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York,

in his catalogue essay for his 1936 exhibition, "Cubism and Abstract Art."[31] Indeed, Barr's specific terms are crucial, as a discourse of nature runs throughout his text, or rather, his account of abstract art is structured by an underlying narrative of withdrawal, an "impulse away from 'nature.'"[32] Barr divides modern art into "pure-abstractions," such as the works of Malevich and late Mondrian, "in which the artist makes a composition of abstract elements such as geometrical or amorphous shapes," and "near-abstractions," such as the works of Arp and Picasso or Mondrian's early "plus and minus" seascapes, "in which the artist, starting with natural forms, transforms them into abstract or nearly abstract forms."[33] In pure-abstraction, "resemblance to nature is at best superfluous and at worst distracting," and "may easily adulterate" the "purity" of abstract art.[34] In short, and crucially, Barr divides abstract art into that which is "organic or biomorphic" and that which is "geometrical in its forms." "The shape of the square," Barr concludes, "confronts the silhouette of the amoeba."[35] The following year, however, in an essay entitled "Nature of Abstract Art"—pun, one can only hope in the present context, entirely intended—Meyer Schapiro also defines abstract art in part in terms of its "exclusion of natural forms," but, in terms that anticipate Solomon-Godeau's own critique of Siskind, criticizes Barr for speaking of abstract art independently of historical conditions.[36] Instead, Schapiro historicizes abstraction and its fundamental condition of the opposition between mind and nature, and situates these conditions and the aesthetic practices of abstract art in the context of modernization and modernity's pervasive and destructive ideology of nature.[37] "The thousand and one ingenious formal devices … which affirm the abstract artist's active sovereignty over objects," he writes, "are discovered experimentally by painters who seek freedom outside of nature and society and consciously negate the formal aspects of perception—like the connectedness of shape and color or the discontinuity of object and surroundings—that enter into the practical relations of man in nature."[38] In Schapiro's account both the devices of modern art and modern ideologies of nature and society are instances of what Jason Moore has recently called modernity's originary "violent abstraction": the dualism of Nature/Society in which

the mutual relations that constitute nature and society and "co-produce manifold configurations of…humanity-in-nature/nature-in humanity" are suppressed, and nature and society are treated as discrete from each other. This violent abstraction, as Moore demonstrates, is fundamental to authorizing modernity's exploitation of nature.[39]

While Greenberg clearly hews more closely to Barr's rhetoric of purity and his opposition between the geometric and the organic, at moments in his essays he offers a historical account of the shift in Western art first to representational art and then to abstraction that is not only reminiscent of Schapiro's account of modernity as an alienation from nature, but that also identifies the historical conditions of abstraction as complicit in modernity's exploitation of the natural world.[40] The "stimulus" of the "previous great revolution in Western painting" constituted by the "three-dimensionality of the Renaissance," Greenberg wrote in 1944, "was a fresh awareness of space provoked by expanding economic and social relations in the late Middle Ages and by the growing conviction that man's chief mission on earth is the conquest of his environment."[41] By the mid-nineteenth century, however, one of the realizations that made "obsolete the general conceptions under which illusionist art had functioned" was that "the earth would no longer afford to Western man or his economy infinite space in which to expand."[42] But here is where Greenberg parts ways with Schapiro's account, for where Schapiro decries the disconnection and discontinuity of humanity from nature in modernity of which abstract art is an emblem, Greenberg writes in a 1949 essay, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting," of early twentieth-century abstract art that it "permitted the claims of the medium to overrule those of nature almost entirely."[43] And yet, dialectically, he claims, nature also stamped itself indelibly on modern painting—not nature's "appearance," but its "logic"—so that the triumph of the pictorial medium over nature came with Picasso and Braque's "realization that only by transposing the internal logic by which objects are organized in nature could aesthetic form be given to the irreducible flatness which defined the picture plane."[44] Basing his account of abstraction on a divide between the organic and biomorphic,

on the one hand, and on the other, the inorganic and geometric in the larger context of a modern alienation of human culture and society from the natural world, even the flattening of the picture plane, in Greenberg's terms, is implicated in a history of exploitation and exhaustion of the environment and natural world.

I quote from this discourse of abstraction and nature so extensively because it sets out the specific terms Siskind most often used to describe his own aesthetic practice: not those of depoliticization or of a heroic struggle with the medium, but rather concerning how his abstract pictures almost always "contained [both] a formal element and an organic element."[45] And far from the flat picture plane and its abstractions being the site of the medium overturning nature, it was rather the place of natural processes where the formal and the organic intersect or are even at one. In photographs such as "Gloucester Rocks 1" of 1944 (figure 8) or "Seaweed 8" of 1947 (figure 7), the opposition Barr and Greenberg posit between the biomorphic and the geometric, or between the organic and the inorganic, is broken down by the forces of erosion and decay that play across the picture plane. The lichen that textures the rocks in "Gloucester Rocks 1" also eats the rocks away, reshaping them, even as they constitute what Siskind called in a note "a texture derived from its form.[46] In "Seaweed 8" the forces of waves and tides sculpt the two rocks and bring them into proximity, so that their mineral forms come to have rounded and amorphous, seemingly organic shapes, even as the light, the placement of the camera, and the tonal structure and texture of the film, to redeploy Greenberg's complaint about Weston's photographs, makes "everything look as though it were made of the same substance." Indeed, Siskind's rock forms are not "inanimate," as Greenberg put it of Weston's depictions of similar forms; rather, as Siskind later said of his experience making such photographs, he "could hardly bear to walk over the rocks" because they were "very alive things."[47] Siskind wrote his fullest account of his photography in 1945 in light of his recent discovery of abstraction in the natural forms and environments such as these he encountered in Gloucester and Martha's Vineyard:

> These pictures…are informed with animism – not so much that these inanimate objects resemble the creatures of the animal world (as indeed they often do), but rather they suggest the energy we usually associate with them. Aesthetically, they pretend to the resolution of these sometimes fierce, sometimes gentle, but always conflicting forces.
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> Photographically speaking, there is no compromise with reality. The objects are rendered sharp, fully textured, and undistorted (my documentary training!). But the potent fact is not any particular object; but rather that the meaning of these objects exists only in their relationship with other objects, or in their isolation (which comes to the same thing, for what we feel most about an isolated object is that it has been deprived of a relationship).
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> These photographs appear to be a representation of a deep need for order. Time and again "live" forms play their little part against a backdrop of strict rectangular space – a flat, unyielding space. They cannot escape back into the depth of perspective. The four edges of the rectangle are absolute bounds. There is only the drama of the objects, and you, watching.[48]

Perhaps now we can see why Greenberg reacted to Siskind's photography with such ire. Siskind certainly does buy into Greenberg's concept of the flatness and isolation of the picture plane. But far from being a mere acolyte of Greenberg's doxology of abstract art, Siskind systematically recites and then thoroughly violates and mixes Greenberg's terms for rejecting both organic form and photographic abstraction. Indeed, Siskind's very self-imposed limitation of edge and depth and even context in his photography enables other crucial things to become visible: the kinds of relationships between human and nature, organic and inorganic, figure and environment that can be traced or that emerge through form. Abstraction, that is, as a form of life.

Siskind worked toward this understanding of abstraction nearly contemporaneously with a line of thinking quite apart from that of Barr and Greenberg, of which he was almost certainly not aware in his earlier years but with which his work eventually crossed paths. It is a line of non-dualist thought about form, the organic, and environment that appears in the work of Henri Focillon, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Rudolf Arnheim during the decades spanning from 1934 to 1954—and that I want to argue not only illuminates the formalism of all of the photographers I am considering in this essay, but also needs to be incorporated

into current debates concerning ecological aesthetics.[49] In his seminal theorization of *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934), Focillon treats art and nature as similarly expressive of biological forces and expressive through form, writing, "Life is form, and form is the modality of life. The relationships that bind forms together in nature cannot be pure chance, and what we call 'natural life' is in effect a relationship between forms, so inexorable that without it this natural life could not exist. So it is with art as well."[50] To understand life as form and form as life, Focillon claims, one must reject the dualisms of sprit and matter or matter and form, in favor of what can sound at times in his text like a monism of matter and form, but which he more commonly describes as a relationship in which form and matter emerge from each other—much as the interactions between inorganic and organic matter would later constitute the shapes, the "live" forms playing out their dramas on the unyielding spaces of Siskind's photographs.[51] Form, that is, is not an external force impressed upon matter, nor does it constitute a withdrawal from nature and matter, nor is it an abstract element never found in nature, as Greenberg had claimed of line; rather, "between nature and man form intervenes."[52]

For Merleau-Ponty, the notion of form does not simply intervene but integrates what he called the physical, vital, and human orders—the inorganic, the organic, and signification."[53] Merleau-Ponty proposed a "philosophy of form" eight years after Focillon's work in his first book, *The Structure of Behavior* (1942), in order, he writes, "to understand the relations of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological, or even social."[54] His philosophy of form draws upon the concept, once prevalent in studies of biology, psychology, and art, of *gestalt*, a form that is not only composed of the relationship of figure and ground in perception, but is more broadly any emergent whole that is dependent on but not reducible to its parts, a form that is dependent on and interactive with its milieu but not reducible to it and indeed, to use a term Merleau-Ponty and Greenberg share, can be "transposed"—like a living organism interdependent with its environment, like an ecosystem, but also, to take two of Merleau-Ponty's recurring metaphors, like a musical

structure, like the composition of a picture.[55] Form in Merleau-Ponty's early work, then, is not only a matter of aesthetics or perception; rather it characterizes the natural world itself, its organic forms and their milieu, its ecosystems, as "a self-organizing system of 'gestalts'—embodied and meaningful relational configurations or structures."[56] In *Art and Visual Perception* (1954, rev. 1974), Arnheim brought much of the same research into gestalt out of which Merleau-Ponty had constructed his philosophy of form to bear upon understanding the dynamic relationships between figure and ground and the tensions between mutually independent spatial structures as they meet on a picture plane.[57] Indeed, in a move both reminiscent of the organic and biomorphic logic of Focillon's and Merleau-Ponty's texts and seeming to anticipate Zhang Jin's photographs of plants in *Ant Crossing River*, Arnheim's discussion of negative space and "the delicate task of determining the proper distances between pictorial objects [that] probably requires a sensitive attention to physiologically determined attractions and repulsions in the visual field" leads him to a brief consideration of "a similarly subtle balancing of objects and interstices under physical or physiological field conditions, e.g. in the…blood capillaries in organic tissue, and the venation of leaves."[58] For all three of these thinkers, aesthetic form is not a violent abstraction negating relations between humans and nature, but rather is both constitutive of and emergent from nature.

Arnheim seems to have recognized such subtle relationships among objects and interstices, organic and inorganic forms constituting the flat picture plane of Siskind's photographs when, thanking the photographer for a print Siskind had presented him on his retirement from Harvard in 1974, Arnheim wrote of how the print "draws meaning and the presence of reality from merely presenting the subtleties of a surface in all its immediacy. The rough skin of the natural wood and the stroke of a human hand—a combination that means much to me."[59] I have not been able to ascertain which of his photographs Siskind gave Arnheim, and Arnheim's comment is both a precise and succinct description of the effects of a Siskind photograph and could well describe many of them. But "Chicago 22" from 1960 (figure 9) does depict the subtleties of the rough skin of natural wood as they are

brought out by broad brushstrokes left by a human hand—a surface that in turn is overlaid with narrow strokes of black paint to the lower left, the burnt remnant of a wooden sign, and, if not the venation of leaves, the similar capillary forms of branches delicately traced in shadow across the picture plane. Such a combination, Arnheim observes, "draws meaning." For Siskind a crucial discovery through his photography was how meaning both emerges out of and shapes the forms of found objects without being reducible to them. As Siskind described it in an interview in 1963:

> I found that the total effect was [it was] a picture on a flat plane. I wiped out deep space. I had objects [which] were all organic-looking objects, shapes, and they were in a geometrical setting, or flat. So what I found I was doing was, I was getting away from naturalistic space—and that was one of the ways I was getting away from it—and also that the objects themselves no longer functioned as objects. Although I would find a hunk of wood and put it there, it was no longer a piece of wood. It was still the piece of wood, it was photographed sharp, but [instead of being wood] you felt it more as a *shape*. And this shape might suggest an animal shape. So, it became transformed from an object to a force, and this force was acting in a plane, in a setting that was no longer realistic….
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> In the pictures, you have the object. But you have in the object, or superimposed on it, a thing I would call the image, which contains the idea. And these things are present at one and the same time and there is a business going on, [there's] a conflict, a tension…. This ambiguity, this conflict, this tension that the object is there and yet it's not an object. It's something else. It has meaning, and the meaning is partly the object's meaning, but mostly my meaning….
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> And so I began to feel the importance of how these rocks hovered over each other, touched each other, pushed against each other, see, this whole business of *next* to each other—or what I call contiguity.[60]

The force—what Arnheim characterized as "attractions and repulsions in the visual field"—emerging from the composition of organic and geometric forms in Siskind's photographs, the force that gives rise to meaning and is meaningful in itself is, then, "contiguity." Siskind would return to this term at crucial moments of speaking of his work. The term itself harbors tensions and ambiguities, even near-contradictions. As the definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* has it, *contiguity* is "the condition of touching or being in contact," a "thing in contact," a "contiguous thing, point, surface," or even "a continuous mass, whereof all the

parts are in uninterrupted contact"; and yet contiguity can also indicate "close proximity, without actual contact."[61] Siskind's use of the term in his rhetoric and as it informs his photographic practice encompasses this entire range of association, which for him carried a strong affective charge, for "this whole business of contiguity" was "the whole 'realization' of the importance of how people feel in relation to each other…the nearness and the touch, the relation."[62]

Thus for Siskind, the stone walls of Martha's Vineyard became "conditions of contiguity" in his photographs, and certainly the suggestion of an animal or humanoid form emerges from the placement and contiguity of the rocks and seaweed in "Seaweed 8."[63] More complexly, each form in "Chicago 22" registers traces of the relationships between force and wood, whether it is the force of brushstrokes that highlight the grain or conceal it, the force of fire that has partially consumed the sign hanging diagonally across the flat picture plane (or the force of wood combusting), or whether it is the forces of wood and light tracing the shadowy forms of living branches across the entire surface. But it is the contiguity of all these forms that makes visible the intersection of human and nature emerging from different moments in the life and death of wood in its environment. The flat picture plane here is far from being a mere arena of isolated confrontation. And the situation such a picture manifests is a far cry from that which Schapiro describes of "the abstract artist's sovereignty over objects" and negation of "the formal aspects of perception—like the connectedness of shape and color or the discontinuity of object and surroundings—that enter into the practical relations of man in nature." Rather, as he worked with his camera in natural or human-built environments (or a combination of both), Siskind looked for places where natural forms and human traces come together, not in moments of harmony or confrontation, but of contiguity. Siskind's compositions bring forms into relationships of contiguity by isolating them within the frame of the photograph. But the meaning that emerges from such connections is always a question: What, the viewer must ask, is contiguous to what? What brings these shapes together? What is the nature of their

relationships? What emerges from their contiguity? And such questions regarding what is visible in the photographs lead to questions of what is absent or cannot be made visible: of what environments and histories (both human and natural) beyond the frame are these depicted places a part? What is the nature of the forces at work both on and through these forms, both within and beyond the photograph?

Such questions permeate Zhang Jin's project, *Another Season*. "Month of Falling Leaves" (Ye Yue) (figure 2), for instance, juxtaposes the persistence of three varyingly full trees against a sand dune marked by its own ongoing patterns of growth, whose traces are the ripples that shape its surface, and collapse. Such patterns and shapes, however, are the visible manifestations of an environmental history of deforestation and desertification that extends two millennia into the past. Ferdinand von Richthofen, the German geographer who first coined the term, "Silk Road," during the late nineteenth century and wrote extensively on the intertwining of geology and economy in northwestern China, remarked on the ongoing destruction of vegetation in the region, writing that "the ancestors of the present generation exterminated the forests; after that the last remnants of shrubs were also consumed."[64] The region of which the Hexi Corridor Zhang Jin photographed is a part had once been a mosaic of forest and grassland populated by pastoral nomads, but over centuries of conflict between the Chinese and various nomadic peoples from the Xiongnu to the Mongols, one of the key strategies of the Chinese for annihilating the peoples inhabiting the region was, as Robert Marks observes, to transform the "ecological basis for the nomadic lifestyle" by uprooting forests and ploughing grasslands into farms.[65] The unintended consequence of this colonizing project, first ordered by Emperor Wu (r. 147-87 BCE) of the Chinese Han Dynasty, was to set in motion a pattern in which the ploughing of grasslands leads to wind erosion and thence to desertification that would be repeated again and again over the ensuing centuries; even in the present day the global demand for cashmere and the resulting pressure to graze increasing numbers of goats on what grassland remains has driven the further desertification of the region.[66] What became the network of trade routes and the

histories of cultural circulation they drew that collectively would come to be called the Silk Road originated during the Han Dynasty in Emperor Wu's push westward in search of allies against the pastoral nomads he was trying to destroy.[67]

This is the ecological history of desertification, commerce, and circulating cultures that forms the traces—what Zhang Jin had called objects that have become "homeless pastoral nomads"—that Zhang frames in photographs like "Wordless Stele" (figure 1). This photograph, which marks what Zhangin the *Artforum* interview calls the "juncture" at which his project turned toward what he called an aesthetic between abstraction and figuration, is configured by an interplay of erasure and marking in which a wooden memorial tablet, uprooted and transported, the words engraved on its surface and the historical moment they commemorated having been eroded away by wind and sand, is itself now re-embedded in, as the critic Hai Jie puts it, the "flowing sands" that are themselves marked with "ripples [literally "pattern-routes," *wenlu*] left by the sweeping winds."[68] These ripples in the sand are patterns that emerge from a self-organizing process of the fall, collision, piling up and saltation (or downward bounce) of windborne grains of sand.[69] This process amplifies any small disturbances in the movement of sand, and indeed in Zhang's photograph the flow patterns of the sand ripples appear to have organized themselves around the wordless stele embedded in them—an interplay of the textures of sand ripples and wood grain that Zhang remarks he specifically sought to bring out through low-contrast printing in the darkroom.[70] As Focillon puts it in a chapter on the various materials out of which artworks and their mediums are constituted, entitled, "Forms in the Realm of Matter," "Matter, even in its most minute details, is always structure and activity, that is to say, form…. Form does not behave as some superior principle modeling a passive mass, for it is plainly observable how matter imposes its own form upon form…. All different kinds of matter are subject…to a certain formal vocation. They have consistency, color, and grain. They are form…and because of that fact, they call forth, limit or develop the life of the forms of art…. Thus, their form, in its raw state, evokes, suggests, and propagates other forms"—much as in Zhang's

photograph, "Damaged Fresco" (Lou hen) (figure 10) the interactions between inorganic and organic matter would later constitute the shapes, the "live" forms of the nomadic history signified by galloping horses and their riders as they is overtaken by their own medium and reformed by traces of water dripping in a subsequent past.[71] To put the matter in a necessarily circular form: the forms that emerge from the natural and human made objects in Zhang's photographs are themselves manifestations of the multiple forces of the ecological histories that shape the environments Zhang depicts.

The work of Zhang Jin, Yu Huaqiang, and Xing Danwen suggests that history and ecosystems are not representable, but are expressed through gestalts, contiguities, and configurations of the abstract and figurative forms of matter, traces where human and natural histories visibly produce each other and are framed and processed by the photographer. Contemporary Chinese photographers have turned to mid-twentieth century aesthetic and philosophical explorations of abstraction, form, and nature, not as a turning away from history and politics, but precisely as a mode of rethinking the interrelationships among culture, economy, history, social change, and nature in a present moment in which the nature of nature is the most urgent of questions. Barr, Schapiro, and Greenberg either wrote or wrote of the history of abstraction and of form and surface as a history of the exclusion of nature from art, part of modernity's larger violent abstraction of nature from culture and society. And yet, as the work of Focillon, Merleau-Ponty, Arnheim, and Siskind disclose, not only has nature been central to thinking form since the early twentieth century, but form has been central to thinking nature, life, and the relations of organisms and environments. To juxtapose the photography of mid-twentieth century America and contemporary China is to ask how we might re-evaluate the politics of formalism and think pictorially the forms of ecology and the ecology of form. But to do so ultimately urges that the debates about nature and culture that frame debates about form and abstraction in both places and times need to be incorporated into contemporary writing about art's ecological turn.

[1] Daozi, "Zhang Jin tan 'You yi ji' " [Zhang Jin discusses "Another Season"]. *Artforum* (Chinese online edition) (2013) http://artforum.com.cn/words/6099#. For a provocative roundtable discussion on the relationships between the Silk Road and other premodern trade routes and globalization from the perspective of contemporary art, see Barry Flood et al., "The Global before Globalization," *October* 133 (2010): 3-19.

[2] Daozi, "Zhang Jin Discusses *Another Season*."

[3] Cao Liangbin, "Dark and Nostalgic Words for a Golden Age: Zhang Jin's *Another Season*, in Zhang Jin, *You yi ji* (Another Season) (Beijing: Three Shadows + 3 Gallery, 2013), n.p.

[4] Xing Danwen. 2003. "disCONNEXION: Statement." www.danwen.com/web/works/dis/statement.html.

[5] Richard Vine, "Beijing Confidential: Xing Danwen," *Art in America* 98, no. 2 (2010): 87.

[6] Xing Danwen, "disCONNEXION."

[7] Zhang Jin, "Mayi guo he" (Ant Crossing River), http://lakezhan.com/cn/works/ant-crossing-river/.

[8] Zhang Jin, "Hua jie" (Broken Flowers), http://lakezhan.com/cn/works/broken-flowers/.

[9] On historical change as the co-production of humans and environment, see Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 21-27.

[10] Zheng Ziyu, "Jingzi li de dongfang: Zhang Jin shying zhong de lishi yu richang" (The East in the Mirror: History and the Everyday in Zhang Jin's Photography), interview with Zhang Jin, http://news.lakezhan.com/index.php?m=08&y=13&d=02&entry=entry130802-100817.

[11] Wang Congyun, "Zhang Jin: guiqulai *You yi ji*" (Zhang Jin: Return to *Another Season*), interview with Zhang Jin, http://news.lakezhan.com/index.php?m=12&y=12&d=02&entry=entry121202-222657.

[12] Daozi, "Zhang Jin Discusses *Another Season*."

[13] Daozi, "Zhang Jin Discusses *Another Season*."

[14] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1: 34-35.

[15] Elaine de Kooning, "The Photographs of Aaron Siskind," in *Aaron Siskind: Toward a Personal Vision 1935-1955*, ed. Deborah Martin Kao and Charles A. Meyer (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Museum of Art, 1994), 59.

[16] Aaron Siskind, "Credo," in *Photographers on Photography*, ed. Nathan Lyons (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 98.

[17] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott et al. and edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press), 4: 390-391.

[18] Jeannine K. Lee, "Interview: Aaron Siskind," *Contact Sheet: Newsletter of the Allen Street Gallery* II, no. 1 (August 1986): 4-5.

[19] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style," in *Illuminations: Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, ed. Liz Heron and Val Williams (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 113-114.

[20] Ibid., 114. The interview Solomon quotes from is Aaron Siskind, "Thoughts and Reflections," *Afterimage*, vol. 1, no. 6 (March 1973): 2.

[21] Janis Bultman, "The Conflicting Rhythms of Aaron Siskind," *Darkroom Photography* 6, no. 2 (1984): 22.

[22] Xing Danwen, "disCONNEXION."

[23] "Aaron Siskind: The Egan Gallery Years 1947-1954," press release, Robert Mann Gallery (2008), www.robertmann.com/2008-siskind-press.

[24] Clement Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston," *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 2: 61.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 62.

[28] Ibid., 63.

[29] Cited in Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 154, 158. Jones's discussion of what she calls Greenberg's [Alfred] "Stieglitz Problem" of "biomorphically inclined modernists," as well as the larger argument of her brilliant book concerning how Greenberg's positing of an abstraction that abstracts away from the body and from all the senses but "eyesight alone" have been essential to developing my argument here.

[30] Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye," 62.

[31] Before Barr, Wilhelm Worringer's classic text of 1908, *Abstraction and Empathy*, had formulated an account of abstraction in part in terms of a "suppression of life," and empathy as an expression of "organic life" and of naturalism. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 14 and *passim*.

[32] Alfred H. Barr, "Cubism and Abstract Art," in *Abstraction*, ed. Maria Lind, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 28.

[33] Ibid., 29.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 33.

[36] Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," in *Abstraction*, ed. Maria Lind, 35.

[37] Ibid., 41.

[38] Ibid., 44.

[39] Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), 5, 20-21, 47-48. Moore adopts the terms from Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

[40] Jones thoroughly explores the links between industrial urban modernity and Greenberg's formulation of abstract art throughout *Eyesight Alone*, e.g. p. 70.

[41] Clement Greenberg, "Abstract Art," *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 1: 199.

[42] Ibid., 201.

[43] Clement Greenberg, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting," *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 2: 272.

[44] Ibid., 273.

[45] Jaromir Stephany, "Interview with Aaron Siskind," in *Aaron Siskind: Toward a Personal Vision 1935-1955*, ed. Kao and Meyer, 44.

[46] Aaron Siskind, miscellaneous notes including brief biography, ca. 1956, file AG30:28:18, Aaron Siskind archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

[47] Quoted in Carl Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1982), 57.

[48] Aaron Siskind, "The Drama of Objects," in *Photographers on Photography*, 97.

[49] Indeed, the Chinese philosopher Jiang Yuhui draws together the work of Merleau-Ponty, Focillon, Arnheim, among others in his own recent reflections on the phenomenology of pictorial space in Chinese landscape painting before the twentieth century. Jiang Yuhui, *Hua yu zhen: Meiluo-Pangdi yu Zhongguo shanshui huajing* [Painting and truth: Merleau-Ponty and Chinese Landscape Paintings] (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2013), 131-135 and *passim*.

[50] Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles B. Hogan and George Kubler, rpt. (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 33.

[51] Ibid., 95.

[52] Ibid., 124.

[53] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963),131.

[54] Ibid., 3.

[55] Ibid., 87. On figure and ground in the context of the relationship of organism and milieu as a gestalt structure, see ibid., 92.

[56] Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 21.

[57] Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 281-298.

[58] Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, 239.

[59] Rudolf Arnheim to Aaron Siskind, 6 June, 1974, file AG30:11, selected correspondence A-B, Aaron Siskind archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

[60] Stephany, "Interview with Aaron Siskind," 43-46. I have slightly altered the transcript according to the tape of the interview in the Aaron Siskind archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. Additions or changes indicated with brackets; Siskind's own emphasis in speaking marked in italics.

[61] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Contiguity."

[62] Stephany, "Interview with Aaron Siskind," 45. Contiguity also informed Siskind's understanding of historical temporality. Despite his apparent disengagement from historical realities, Siskind applied to the Guggenheim Foundation in 1954 and 1962 for funding for "a photographic study of the architecture of Rome in such a way as to document the succession of cultures that have existed and still exist there. Rome is the best center for such a study; numerous architectural remains covering a period of about 2500 years are present in layers or in close contiguity in a relatively small area." Aaron Siskind, Statement of Aim and Plan of Work, application to Guggenheim Foundation, 1962, file AG30:37, Aaron Siskind archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

[63] Aaron Siskind, "Notes on the Photographic Act," *Spectrum*, publication of the Rhode Island School of Design VI no. 2 (May 1956).

[64] Quoted in Joachim Radkau, *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 105.

[65] Robert B. Marks, *China: Its Environment and History* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 79.

[66] I am greatly simplifying Marks' detailed and subtle environmental history. See Marks, *China*, 77-86, 106-111, 150-156, 162-165, 184-193, 230-243, 265-293.

[67] Ibid., 82-83. Prasenjit Duara formulates the concept of circulatory history in the context of environmental sustainability in his book, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[68] Hai Jie, "Zhang Jin: Cong diqi dao xinxing" (Zhang Jin: From Local Climate to Mental Disposition), http://news.lakezhan.com/index.php?m=01&y=13&d=02&entry=entry130102-223356.

[69] Philip Ball, *Flow: Nature's Patterns*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75-110.

[70] Wang Congyun, "Zhang Jin: Return to *Another Season*," and Zheng Ziyu, "The East in the Mirror."

[71] Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 97.