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Touring the Archive, Archiving the Tour: Image, Text, and Experience with the Center for Land Use Interpretation

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Art Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer, 2005), pp. 78-87

Published by: [College Art Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068385>

Accessed: 09/01/2013 14:43

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**Image from the exhibition *A View into the Pipe: East Central Interceptor Sewer, 2004*.  
Photograph: CLUI.**

**All images courtesy of Center for Land Use Interpretation.**

## Touring the Archive, Archiving the Tour: Image, Text, and Experience with the Center for Land Use Interpretation

Sarah Kanouse

Whether the visitor steps in from the blazing sunshine of a Culver City sidewalk, thumbs open the cardstock cover of a slim booklet, takes a reclining seat on an air-conditioned bus, or types a few letters in a browser, her point of entry to the work of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) leads to an experience that defies the tidy categorizations of research, art, education, or tourism. An image greets her—an unremarkable image, an unromantic image, an image of

land working, abandoned, or waiting to be put to work again. If she finds the image beautiful, the tourist gives way to researcher to find beauty in data: reconnaissance-style photos, soil, utility and irrigation maps, and snapshots of infrastructure. As she flips from page to page of her tour book or the online archive, shifts her focus from one image to another in the gallery, or gazes from the window at the changing landscape, the researcher again becomes a tourist, absorbing a carefully prepared text that dutifully explains what is being gazed upon in a way reminiscent of both tour guides and, paradoxically, the stales of research and educational materials.

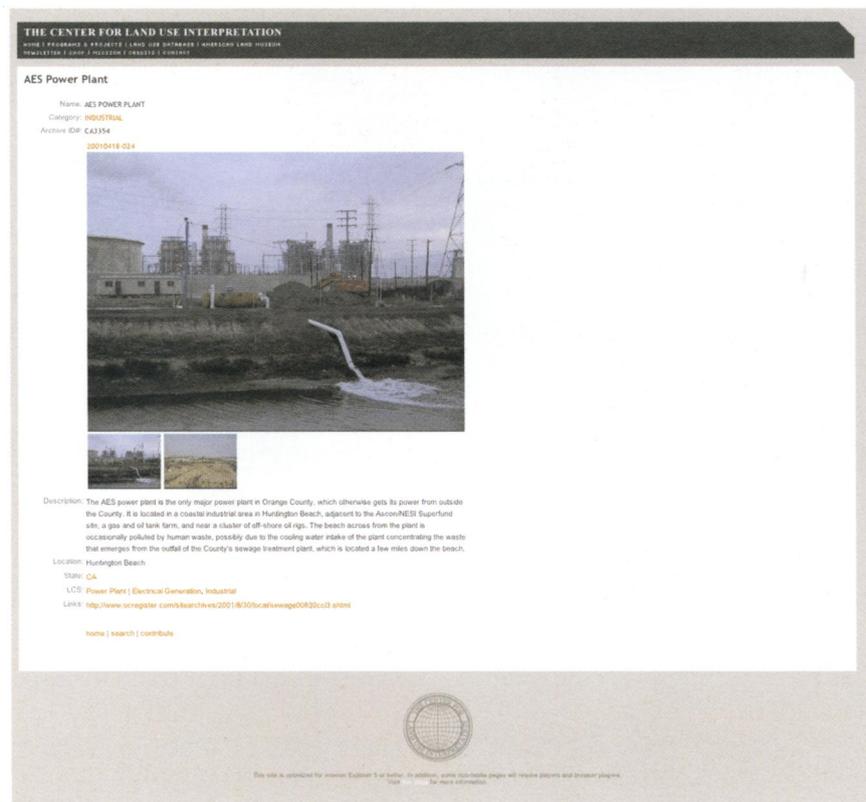
Based in Los Angeles, CLUI describes itself as an independent, nonprofit, educational organization “dedicated to the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation’s lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived.”<sup>1</sup> CLUI has crafted a visually coherent and unaffected set of presentation and interpretive strategies drawn from the places where tourism, the archive, museum educational displays, and Conceptual art intersect. These different traditions, and the ways they present information and defend particular ideologies, enter into a play of resistance with one another. By drawing on so many traditions and refusing complete alliance with any, CLUI exists in a marginal disciplinary space from which can be interpreted not only land use but also the professional, cultural, and ideological frameworks in which the apportionment, utilization, and perception of land have taken place. CLUI’s work actively resists attempts to categorize it within any one of the traditions from which it borrows; indeed, CLUI’s work hinges on the concepts of resistance and marginality. CLUI’s projects propose a subtle and multifaceted resistance mounted through the interplay of text, image, and form. While the organization refuses to state a clear position for or against particular ways land has been used, its body of work resists describing any landscape as either unremarkable or inevitable.

While CLUI’s work is an ongoing investigation in which no single project is completely autonomous, the organization is best known for exhibitions in its Los Angeles office and gallery, catalogue and guide books, and bus tours, activities which may be more or less linked by explicit investigative parameters. It also produces interactive CD-ROMs and continues working on an exhaustive, online land-use database. A quarterly newsletter reports on major projects and presents smaller ones; a satellite CLUI center in Troy, New York, presents lectures and exhibitions related to New England and the mid-Atlantic region; and the Land Use Museum in Wendover, Utah, offers exhibitions and an artists’ residency program. A smaller number of “extrapolative projects” present creative, thought-provoking interventions in the landscape. The booklets, bus tours, land-use database, and exhibition spaces offer an introduction to CLUI’s work and represent a

See also these CLUI publications (all published in Los Angeles by the Center for Land Use Interpretation): *5th Avenue Peninsula: An Inexhaustive Investigation of Urban Content* (1997), *Back to the Bay: Exploring the Margins of the San Francisco Bay Area* (2001), *Ground Up: An Examination of Soil in the Margins of Los Angeles* (2003), *Nuclear Proving Grounds of the World* (1998), and *Route 58: A Cross-Section of California*, (2000).

1. From the CLUI mission statement, available online at <http://www.clui.org>.

Screenshot of the land-use database. The page shows the entry for the AES power plant, Orange County, California. Accessed February 7, 2005, at <http://ludb.clui.org/ex/i/CA3354/>.



cross-section of the hybrid presentation strategies the organization employs and the corporeal experiences it produces.

Probably the most commonly used vehicle for accessing CLUI's work is its Web site, which provides an introduction to the range of the organization's activities. The only project existing entirely online, however, is the mammoth land-use database, a searchable archive of land in every state, with CLUI's customary emphasis on urban and rural infrastructure and industrial and military sites. The online archive is searched with that most familiar of Web interface conventions: the clickable map. While some sites are well documented by photographs, other locations are described and situated exclusively in language. Archive visitors engage in an armchair experience: there are no field visits or primary sources here. Insofar as the land-use database is both travel and research, it is highly mediated, most noticeably by the interface and comparable absence of photos but also, as with all guided tours and secondary sources, by decisions of what and how to include and exclude.

On the Web site, a visitor might learn about the exhibition currently on display in CLUI's tiny Los Angeles gallery and decide to pay a visit. In the context of a gallery, CLUI's work takes on a very different "read," and the similarity of the image/text strategies employed on the Web site and in the publications to Conceptual art conventions is foregrounded. While each exhibition differs, they usually employ photographs, printed and framed or, in recent years, displayed on monitors, video, and explanatory texts, all hung in a carefully (often dimly) lit, modernist, concrete room. The exhibitions may inventory land use, infrastructure, or a particular site (e.g., *A View into the Pipe: East Central Interceptor Sewer*);



**An installation view of CLUI's exhibition *Ground Up: Photographs of the Ground in the Margins of Los Angeles, 2003*.**

document architectures of government or law enforcement (*Emergency State: First Responder and Law Enforcement Training Architecture* or *Proximity Issue: The Barricades of the Federal District*); or investigate representations of the landscape (*Model of Decay: The Chesapeake Bay Hydraulic Model* or *On Location: Places as Sets in the Landscape of Los Angeles*). In the gallery, images are often foregrounded, outweighing the explanatory texts, and the pictures may assume a stark, formal beauty. Turn a corner, however, and a wall of books on land use greets the visitor, again collapsing the boundary between art and the archive and resisting the choice of either.

On the bookshelf at the gallery, a visitor might pick up a number of CLUI publications, usually created in conjunction with exhibitions. As armchair tourism, the books offer few of the sensual or imaginative pleasures of travel. Some, such as *Hinterland*, function primarily as exhibition catalogues. Most, however, have more mixed uses. Some books are overtly intended as tourist guidebooks, such as *Back to the Bay*, which traces a continuous four-hundred-mile journey along the San Francisco Bay, and *Route 58*, which offers a suggested breakfast stop for tourists planning the recommended two-day, two-hundred-ten-mile trip. The ambitious *The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America's Nuclear Proving Ground* hopes to serve armchair tourists, researchers, and visitors alike, while admitting the limitations of its own information, the difficulty and danger of physical tourism to the site, and CLUI's own complicity with the Department of Energy's hopes to open portions of the test site to tourism. Other booklets assemble information not otherwise available in one place, such as *Nuclear Proving Grounds of the World* or *Ground Up: An Examination of Soil in the Margins of Los Angeles*.

Regardless of the differences among the publications, they share a visually

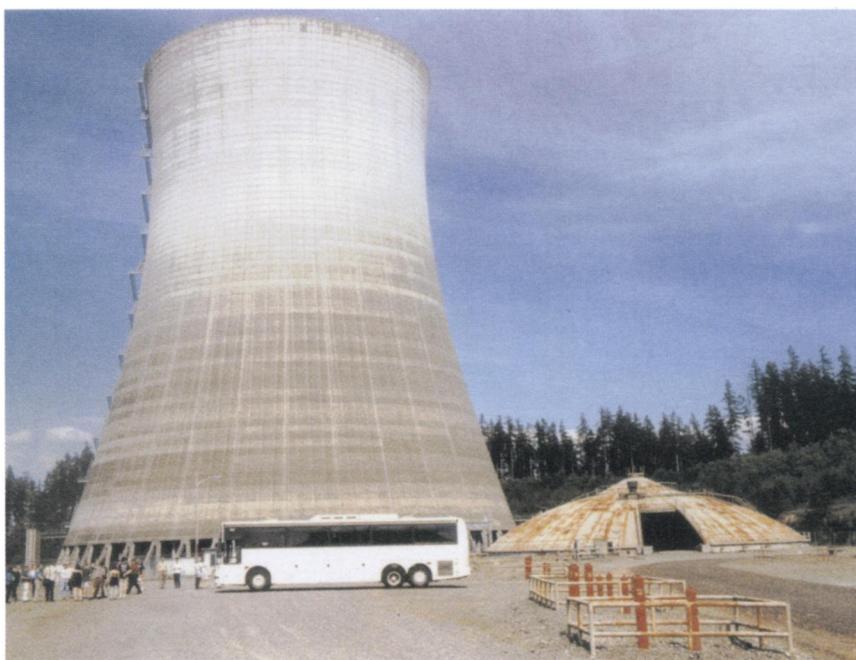
Image from the exhibition *Proximity Issue: The Barricades of the Federal District, 2002*.



spare aesthetic reminiscent more of official reports or early Conceptual artists' use of image and text than excitement-inducing tour guides. The text is similarly restrained: CLUI founder Matthew Coolidge, who researches and writes many of the books singlehandedly, apparently never absorbed the injunction to avoid the passive voice. Nevertheless, the tour-oriented books present ample information to help the visitor or armchair traveler orient himself; satellite photos with site numbers superimposed and labeled aerial photos introduce each section of *Back to the Bay*, while *The Nevada Test Site* opens each section with an overall map and area enlargement. The "attractions" mapped and described in the booklets include an MCI fiber-optic line near the Lake Merritt Channel Bridge in Oakland; a private recreation complex for Chevron employees that includes a yacht club, tennis courts, and shooting ranges in Contra Costa County; a boarded-up Federal Prison Camp where prisoners once assembled military equipment near Kramer Junction, California; and the Grand Junction, Colorado, site of the last Plowshare nuclear test, which, the helpful text tells us, mined for natural gas rendered too radioactive to use by the atomic blast that extracted it. While the restrained visual and textual strategies lend an air of research or educational authority to the publications, the frequent use of the device of the tour undercuts the claim to being "disinterested" research. Conversely, the deadpan inclusion of awkward, uninteresting, or uncomfortable information undercuts the booklets' status as tour guides, as does the inclusion of sites that are unvisitable due to remoteness, private ownership, or danger. The publications most successfully skirt distinctions between tour and research, armchair and corporeal travel by being—however imperfectly or ambivalently—all of them at once.

The exhibition space also functions as CLUI's office, and there the visitor might sign up for a tour offered in conjunction with the exhibition or arrange for a group site visit. While the subject matter of the tours, such as concrete pours of the Inland Empire, might seem like ironic commentaries on conven-

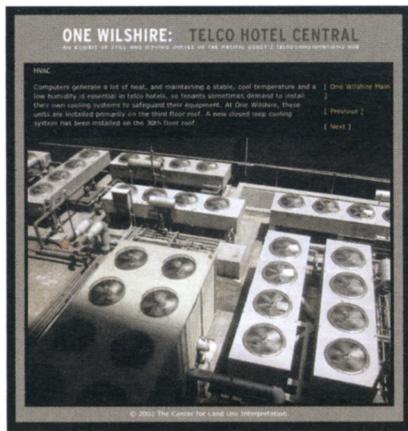
**CLUI bus tour at the Satsop abandoned nuclear power plant in Washington. Part of *Land Use Action*, Seattle Center on Contemporary Art, 1999.**



tional tourism, Coolidge maintains that the choice of the tour is quite utilitarian: to bring people to the land they're learning about. Billed in CLUI literature as opportunities to "expand the mediums of the touristic purview, and to permit the direct experience of sites, as there is no substitute for *being there*, especially in these increasingly virtual times," the bus trips nevertheless are highly mediated affairs.<sup>2</sup> Monitors on the bus, echoing the monitors in the exhibition space, play video clips and photographic stills elaborately timed to correspond with the itinerary. Local "briefers," as CLUI calls them, meet the bus at different points, and tourists listen to a recorded or live interpretive text even as they witness the passing landscape through the bus window or at an outdoor stop. A van equipped with a low-power FM transmitter led at least one tour, piping the interpretive text into the car radios of the following vehicles and any others that happened to pass. While the tours are premised on the belief, underscored by Coolidge, that there is no substitute for corporeal experience, the imposition of an interpretive text also insists that such experience alone is not enough, that information and cognition are necessary for interpretation or understanding to occur. Furthermore, the presence of the technology questions whether an unmediated experience of the land is possible, since the land and our attitudes toward it are already so mediated by human action. While the experiences of touring the archive, visiting an exhibition, or reading a booklet are primarily individual, group tours offer opportunities for conversation and interaction with other tourists, mirroring the social creation of the landscape with the social creation of its interpretation.

As the visitor to the Center for Land Use Interpretation travels through and across the various ways the organization presents its work, she may come to recognize the refusal of the projects to resolve themselves coherently into the categories of research, art, tourism, or education and may provisionally place them in the genre of the photographic essay. While most familiarly found in a popular magazine or a glossy book, the photographic essay can and must expand in form

2. From the CLUI brochure, emphasis original.



Screenshot of the online version of *One Wilshire: Telco Hotel Central*. Accessed February 7, 2005, at [http://www.clui.org/clui\\_4\\_1/ondisplay/OneWilshire/4.html](http://www.clui.org/clui_4_1/ondisplay/OneWilshire/4.html).

to include electronic media and even mediated corporeal experiences such as CLUI's tours. Following W. J. T. Mitchell's formulations of the photographic essay, especially his central concept of the interplay of collaboration and resistance between image and text, the formal devices CLUI uses to challenge the rigidity of disciplinary thinking about land come into sharper focus.

Mitchell identifies several key elements in certain types of photographic essays, namely, photographs accompanied by a highly invasive textual element, an arrangement of photos and texts that asserts their independence and addresses their complex relationship, an ambivalence toward formalism, and a sense of the inadequacy of existing discourses that make "a mixed, hybrid discourse like that of the photographic essay . . . a historical necessity."<sup>3</sup> It is easy to read these characteristics in CLUI's work. While the one-to-one correspondence of image and text might seem to suggest an illustrative relationship, the text is insufficiently developed to be illustrated, and the photographs are too highly framed, too temporally specific, and, frankly, often too dull to exist entirely autonomously. While the textual element is kept scrupulously separate from the images, thereby asserting its independence, the text provides essential information without which the image (or, on the tour, the passing view) cannot be deciphered or fully understood. Yet the images and text also consistently draw attention to their inadequacy to ever quite capture what once was there, which is at least one of the hopes of the tourist. The one-to-one formal relationship of the photographs to a block of text seems both unconsidered, as in "this is how tourbooks are made," and a highly developed parody of the formal choices of the disciplines from which CLUI borrows. And as each form successively collapses into another, a sense of the exhaustion of possibility for existing disciplines to ever adequately grasp or "interpret" the effects of human action on the land is inescapable. All that is left is the mutually dependent, mutually critical texts and images of the photographic essay.

Whatever the resonance of CLUI's work with Mitchell's photographic essay, they also diverge in important ways. Most significantly, perhaps, is the lack of critical self-consciousness written into CLUI's texts, a reluctance to talk critically about the work and an unwillingness to "take sides" in land-use debates. The essays Mitchell discusses—James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, Malek Alloula's *The Colonial Harem*, and Jean Mohr and Edward Said's *After the Last Sky*—are all noteworthy for their highly circular, introspective, and self-critical texts. With the arguable exception of *Camera Lucida*, each also takes a topical political position. CLUI's text is straightforward and informative, and only in a few places is a wry self-consciousness evident if one reads between the lines, as in *The Nevada Test Site* where Coolidge, ever matter-of-fact, writes, "To increase the NTS's potential (and federal support) as a tourist destination, several locations at the NTS are being considered for eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places, including much of the photogenic debris at Frenchman Flat."<sup>4</sup> When I contacted Coolidge in preparation of this paper, he responded supportively to the topic but did not want to address the critical questions I had e-mailed, preferring instead to chat about CLUI programs on the phone. Some people, especially antinuclear activists, have taken issue with CLUI's apparent neutrality, accusing the organization of complicity. CLUI, on the other hand, relishes its supposedly "apolitical" position, bragging that *The Nevada*

3. W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies," in *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 321.

4. CLUI, *The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America's Nuclear Proving Ground* (Los Angeles: Center for Land Use Interpretation, 1996), 7.



**Image from the exhibition *Ground Up: Photographs of the Ground in the Margins of Los Angeles*, 2002.**

Test Site has been “praised by both anti-nuclear activists and Department of Energy officials!”<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, then, CLUI’s programs do not map neatly onto Mitchell’s formulation of the photographic essay. If Mitchell places the photographic essay at the “crossroads of modernism and postmodernism,” then CLUI’s work might better be placed at the margins of both. Insofar as CLUI’s work is a photographic essay, it evidences none of the modernist introspection that marks many of the medium’s exemplary projects. The deadpan appropriation of pop-culture forms such as the bus tour and the tour book would seem to tilt CLUI toward the post-modern, but the rigorous traditionalism and careful attribution in the group’s research belie any cheerful, post-pop sensibility. CLUI’s insistence on ideological and disciplinary indistinctness forces a reexamination of how marginality might be its own form of resistance.

The word “margins” crops up again and again in CLUI’s work. *Back to the Bay* is subtitled *Exploring the Margins of the San Francisco Bay Region*. The bus tour “Margins in Our Midst: A Journey in Irwindale” accompanied the 2003 exhibition *Ground Up: Photographs of the Ground in the Margins of Los Angeles*. In *Hinterland*, we are told that the desert around Los Angeles “tolerates a kind of freedom that expands the margins

5. From CLUI Web site, [http://www.clui.org/clui\\_4\\_1/shop/index.html](http://www.clui.org/clui_4_1/shop/index.html).

An exhibition hall at CLUI's American Land Museum, Wendover, Utah.



of society.”<sup>6</sup> CLUI finds the margins, the utilitarian spaces, the spaces that have yet to be resolved as the most illustrative of land use, much as biologists have found the edge spaces between ecosystems the most diverse and productive—not to mention photo-essayists, who find the stories of marginal populations (tenant farmers, for example, or Palestinians, to take our cue from Mitchell’s essay) compelling subjects for their lenses and pens.

But in addition to making work about geographical margins, CLUI makes work in and on disciplinary margins. Coolidge explains his decision to incorporate CLUI as a nonprofit, rather than working on the activities as an individual, as a move to increase the rigor of his project and to be able to contend in the realm of the institutions with which he must work. But the organization is nonetheless a margin-crossing institution. Organized as an educational nonprofit, its activities and audience are radically different from most nongovernmental organizations. It is an academic project unaffiliated with a university and an art project stripped of both the celebrity of the artist and the cult of the object.<sup>7</sup>

While it may seem strange to claim a position of resistance for a project that appropriates the thoroughly problematic traditions of research, tourism, and museum display, it is precisely because these positions are used, complete with their limitations, absurdities, and complicity, that a nuanced critique emerges. The multiple heritages CLUI harnesses bring different languages of authority that meet, feel out each other’s margins, crumble, and collapse. CLUI accomplishes this collapse not through rhetorical attack, formal innovation, or parodic juxtaposition, but rather through the deadpan redeployment of convention. CLUI’s very capitulation is a form of resistance, and it crops up in disquieting places. For example, when CLUI chooses to include Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a list of sites used in the United States nuclear testing program, it decontextualizes and bureaucratizes the death and maiming of hundreds of thousands of people. But the list suggests the far greater horror of the bombing as well or better than any political essay: the bombings were in many ways a “test” of a new and uncertain weapon, the detonations were only debatably necessary for victory, and in any use of nuclear bombs, testing and combat purposes are separated by only a few steps along a very short path.

While it may be axiomatic that editorial decisions—the choice of what to include and what to omit—are highly ideological and positioned, in practice,

6. CLUI, *Hinterland*, introduction (Los Angeles: Center for Land Use Interpretation, 1997).

7. CLUI’s status as a nonprofit has also assisted it in pursuing grant funding. While the organization is uncannily able to gain the cooperation of the Department of Energy to complete projects, material support comes primarily from arts-oriented foundations: the Lannan Foundation, the Gunk Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

most readers choose to forget the frame. The presentation of awkward information in a familiarly reassuring package borrows the authority of the familiar frame while presenting what it usually excludes and excluding what it often presents. CLUI's tendency to describe what Susan Sontag calls "the pain of others" in an unemotionalized and distant way might dehumanize those affected by, say, the tragedy of the Hiroshima nuclear "test" or the 1928 failure of the San Francisquito Dam, but it also draws attention to the infrastructure—ideological and physical—that permits or expedites such tragedies.<sup>8</sup> The documentary photographs that illustrate CLUI's text preclude not only the pleasures of armchair tourism and the aesthetic contemplation of the art viewer, but also the prurient gaze on the apocalyptic or industrial sublime.

CLUI's visitor is given a respite from the barrage of images of sensational brutality, preventable disaster, and abject (if photogenic) poverty and the compulsion to choose with which tragedy to identify. CLUI's insistence on presenting long-term infrastructure over immediate human narratives insists that these events matter long after their emotionally affecting and visually impressive lives have past. In this way, the publications, exhibitions, and tours are similar to the booklets put out by the Hirsch Farm Project, which in the 1990s published responses to its weeklong summer retreats for artists and cultural workers rather than documentation of them. But the respite from the rush of immediacy is not without its own work. Rather, CLUI's visitor is offered a broad range of information from which his own material relation to the tragedy, injustice, or ruthlessness of business-as-usual might be traced. CLUI offers tools—images, information, interactions—by which interpretations might be made by the visitor and through which a durable practice, rather than sense, of responsibility might be achieved.

Ultimately, then, what CLUI resists is tidy consumption. Coolidge insists, "CLUI has no tangible political objective. The goal is to get people more aware and involved in their physical environment."<sup>9</sup> The exaggerated political neutrality, reinforced by the passive voice of the photos and text, is not where the project ends, however. Rather, CLUI becomes a stage for the recognition of the imposition of texts the visitor inevitably brings to the experiences of reading and seeing. Given my ideological predilections and personal experiences, I cannot help but be alarmed to learn in *Back to the Bay* that the 342-acre Newby Landfill is almost directly on the shores of San Francisco Bay or amused to find a vacant lot on the corner of Owensmouth and Nordhoff in Chatsworth, California—no more than two miles from my uncle's home—depicted in *Ground Up*. In Barthes's familiar formulation, reading (or viewing) creates a space of encounter where the reader and the multiplicity of writings that make up any text "blend and clash."<sup>10</sup> By offering this encounter to the visitor, CLUI invites her to enter into the spaces in which suppositions, concepts, ideologies, practices, and, most concretely, policies around human action on the land are forged—and invitations into contested spaces are never politically neutral.

8. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003).

9. Coolidge, telephone interview, September 9, 2004.

10. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 146.

Sarah Kanouse is an artist whose intermedia work addresses citizenship, public spaces, and local histories. She is currently cocurating an exhibition, *Urban, Rural, Wild*, for Chicago's I space Gallery in September. This fall, she will assume a position as assistant professor in the department of cinema and photography at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.