

WHAT WE CAN'T SEE FROM THE GROUND: The Contribution of Gielen's Images to Climate Activism

"...we have at our disposal modern techniques for seeing everything, apprehending everything, yet we see nothing."

–Sophie Ristelhueber

UNTHOUGHT THOUGHT

Broadly speaking, there are two types of photographs: informational and pensive. One is the rule and the other is the exception. Nearly all photographs are comprehended in an instant and assimilated into an existing store of knowledge, cultural assumptions and beliefs. Even where the image is partially inscrutable to a viewer, some supplemental information is brought to bear so that ultimately the image wholly supports and is supported by that textual supplement. In fact, all informational photographs (which is to say nearly all photographs in general) are subordinated to some text (i.e., a set of things we might say about them), whether that text is implicit or explicit. The informational image confirms knowledge and does not touch belief.

The pensive photograph is an exception. Such an image comes to us like a memory, but not a memory of our own. As Jacques Ranciere, who invented the term, describes it: the pensive image "contains unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which has an effect on the person who views it without her linking it to a determinate object." To adopt Ranciere's terminology wholesale, we can say that such images have a particular capacity to emancipate the spectator, to operate in an unsettling way upon belief.

It would appear that a given photograph could not be both informational and pensive at the same time, as the informational works against the pensive (because it is precisely determinate) and vice versa. One orients and the other disorients. However, there is no reason that a given image cannot be used informationally in one context (or even at one moment in the viewer's interaction) and then function in a pensive state in another context (or when looked at in a dif-

ferent way). Christoph Gielen's aerial photographs are an example of such images, particularly as they relate to the discourse of ecology.

THE SKY IS FALLING

As pensive images, Gielen's photographs appear to be of the ground but are actually of the sky falling.

And the sky is falling. For real this time. How do we know this? It is not anything we can see. It is something we can read: in the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and countless other documents. Despite the misperception of the public that significant scientific uncertainty persists, numerous surveys of relevant peer-reviewed literature and of scientists' opinion in appropriate fields have shown the count of qualified climate change adherents to qualified climate change skeptics is consistently about ninety-seven to three.¹ If ninety-seven of the top financial analysts in the world advised selling a stock or risk total ruin and only three were advising to hold on to it (or that they weren't really sure what to do), and, in the absence of real qualifications to perform an independent analysis yourself, would you really risk holding on to that stock? Likewise, ninety-seven doctors urging treatment and only three advising against it—would you take that risk?

Because what do we non-specialists really know about climate change after all? Do we really know the sky is falling as described in all this literature or do we "merely" believe it? Properly speaking, climate change is the title given to a composite interpretation of certain facts and measurements (things that can be seen), and thus a proposition (however valid) and not a fact itself. In the words of Birgit Schneider, climate change is an "abstract, statistically created, long-term research object."² Belief expresses a relation between myself and a proposition, whereas knowledge expresses a relation between myself and a fact. Seeing, therefore, contributes to knowledge and not to belief—contrary to the pop-

ular adage. As climate change is a proposition, it is a question of belief and cannot be seen. It must be transcribed on top of sight. There are no photographs of climate change, only those that point to it in one way or another. Some right-wing commentators are perhaps right on this point: we believe in climate change (and have very good reason to). It is a matter of faith.

Yet, the fortitude of that belief is exceptionally poor. Michel de Certeau usefully defines belief as an investment in a proposition. For de Certeau that investment is exhibited in action.³ Whatever our strength of belief concerning the science of climate change, we exhibit a very weak belief overall, as evidenced by our near total lack of action. We can read all the documents, agree with them, understand their implications for global risk and building a sustainable society, but not really come to terms with the reality of those projections, the worst-case scenarios of which are traumatic in the fullest sense of the word. Our ability to believe in climate change (whatever we may know about it) is blocked by the thick wall of the Normal. Slavoj Zizek explains this as follows: "our attitude here is that of a fetishistic split. 'I know very well (that global warming is a threat to the entire humanity), but nonetheless I cannot really believe it. It is enough to see the natural world to which my mind is connected: green grass and trees, the sighing of the breeze, the rising of the sun... can one really imagine that all this will be disturbed?'"⁴

Here we have a conundrum that Gielen's images and other art can help us not so much to resolve as simply to get over: climate change and other projective ecological calamities can be seen but not really seen, known but not really known, believed but not really believed. Surmounting barriers to belief in climate change, even momentarily, requires some negative capability.⁵ A proposition can be as real as a fact and climate change is as real as the undeniable force of its calculations of probability, which include the horror of extinction. Once we get over the dangerously consuming and utterly



pointless debate about the “reality” of such calculations, we can get on with the urgent task of coming up with solutions. Gielen’s work contributes to this process by prompting the viewer into a mode of active sight, and this is contingent on getting lost.

THE VALUE OF DISORIENTATION

Most of the time we do not choose to see. It just happens. We open our eyes and the world comes into them. So passive does this seem that we do not consider the constant stream of analysis that sight initiates and propels. As soon as we start receiving visual information—where is the wall, how bright is it, who is here with me—we start to use that information to make decisions. Should I get up, where should I put my foot, do I need to check the time, turn on a light, etc.? In the process of using sight to inform action, we are constantly relying on and reaffirming our notion of what is normal, to-be-expected.

Only when we look at something with a specific, self-conscious intent (including through memory) does the intrinsic relationship between sight and analysis become apparent.

In this active form, sight acquires the capacity to undo assumptions rather than contribute to them. Various forms of technology have augmented the ability of concentrated sight to contribute to such analysis, notably: the use of lenses to increase the range of our sight; the ability to situate a lens inside the human body or at a great remove from the surface of the Earth; and the fixing of such technological sight into documents that can be preserved and considered at length—i.e., photographs, x-rays, or remote sensing data. Such advances in technology have been truly momentous events in human history and have radically altered our notion of “the environment.” So much so that, as Laura Kurgan has noted, “we do not stand at a distance from these technologies, but are addressed by and embedded within them.”⁶ What initially led to a readjustment of the Normal by pushing the boundaries of our senses is inevitably subsumed into its new construction, and the process must begin anew.

Because our selves grow into the technologies we create (à la McLuhan), images that might have triggered self-conscious analysis reflexively in the past are now simply regarded in the same passive way as our bedroom upon waking. This is

true of the aerial image, which has become a part of our everyday lives despite being profoundly unlike normal sight and an affront to photography’s intimate relationship with subjectivity and memory. Formerly, aerial photographs seemed to belong to that class of images—such as x-rays, crime-scene photographs, and GIS data—that demanded specialist interpretation for their full meaning. Now, such views from above are summoned routinely by anyone with a smartphone and proceed to impose, without any definite malice, the “quiet tyranny of orientation” (Kurgan’s words again).⁷

Orientation is tyrannical because it draws us like a tractor beam into the dominion of a single symbolic order, a single way of seeing. It is in this sense that, as Erroll Morris has suggested, belief actually precedes and informs sight, much more than the reverse.⁸ Most of the time, this orienting is quite justified and even necessary. To question and re-consider every piece of visual information would utterly cripple us, rendering us like a character in a Borgesian meditation. However, it is a productive maneuver of the arts and other Humanities to urge us out of this standard mode of orientation when necessary so that we might consider an image



UNTITLED CALIFORNIA IV Video



UNTITLED CALIFORNIA III Video

or idea more deeply. Such slow, active seeing has the capacity to undermine assumptions that would not be examined within the type of speedy, information-driven images of Google Maps, most journalism, or just normal, everyday passive seeing.

THE TWILIGHT ZONE

Gielen’s landscapes apply to the discourse of climate change because they challenge our comfort in the normal and break down deeply held beliefs at a particularly important point—the assumption that growth is unlimited and always beneficial. We need only recognize the panic that ensues when economic growth merely slows down to realize how foundational a belief in unlimited growth is to the dominant culture of Integrated World Capitalism. Even at moments of apparent crisis, no pundit ever questions the assumption of growth, but rather espouses all sorts of ideas about how we can revive spending. A belief in the benefits of unlimited growth is part of “the natural world to which my mind is connected,” just like “the green grass and trees, the sighing of the breeze, the rising of the sun...”

Gielen has signaled his intent to undermine casual viewing of his landscapes through a number of techniques: 1) calling his landscapes Ciphers (i.e., a secret writing, a code, something that needs to be *de*-ciphered); 2) the essentially forensic manner of image composition and sequencing, where the same scene is considered from a number of angles and where patterns are emphasized; and 3) the insertion of curated specialist voices from the fields of urban planning, architecture, and art into the content of the book.

At first glance, Gielen’s landscapes appear to us as cancer cells seen under a microscope, as sci-fi conjurations, as microchips, but not as the banal suburban developments they actually are. It is the same conceit as *The Twilight Zone* or the stories of Kafka. This insertion of abnormality becomes a means to provide an insinuating critique on social issues.

In part, the weirdification of such normal landscapes can be attributed simply to the choice of shooting these developments from the air. Despite their increasing prevalence, aerial images are not much like our direct perception of the world—that type of passive and always churning vision that happens when we merely open our eyes. As Kim Sichel has

pointed out in her catalog essay for an exhibition of contemporary aerial photography, there is “no horizon, no vanishing point, no human scale and few nuances of light and shadow.” Furthermore, “where we are accustomed to standing in one place and seeing life move in front of us, aerial views are uncannily still.”⁹

Gielen capitalizes upon and extends the fundamental estrangement that comes from aerial views. In the first place, he frames his images to present us with what appear to be discrete shapes or entities, playing on our innate reflex to perceive pattern. Then, he meditatively moves around these discrete shapes mimicking in his image selection the manner of analysis or consideration. Such a manner indicates the study of something that is unknown or unclear but of significant interest (i.e., a Cipher). Yet, Gielen does not immediately suggest a given taxonomy or interpretative structure for these Ciphers in the manner of Alex MacLean. Nor does Gielen adorn his images with extravagant technique, in the manner of Emmet Gowin or Mario Giacomelli—a type of gesture that can cut short the experience of estrangement by putting the image squarely within the conventions of

modernist art. Moreover, he does not seek to render analysis feeble by the raw imposition of “imperial beauty” in the manner of David Maisel.

Gielen’s images invite cool analysis and evidentiary consideration, but at the same time provide no basis for such an analysis. This leads to a little shock or panic that is the primary emotional content of the photographs. Such a response is available even to the most casual viewer. Anybody can see that these are very ordinary housing developments, but their aesthetic treatment as unfathomable growths to be considered from every possible angle in a vain attempt to comprehend them makes them appear as malignant, threatening, uncanny (in the precise Freudian sense of both familiar and unfamiliar, hidden and revealed, known and denied).

TREMORS AND CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS

We must concede that this sort of tremor caused by an evocation of the Uncanny or Sublime (and not even direct contact) can shake belief a little but hardly crack its foundation. That is about the best a photograph can hope for, at least a pensive photograph. A lot of misconceptions about the nature of activist art stem from attempts to attribute either too much or too little efficacy to it. It does what it does. Enough tremors and those foundations *will* actually crack. Or else that isolated tremor recollected at the time of voting or of consuming may influence behavior in a way as palpable as a direct experience. This is not trauma exactly, but more like an intimation of trauma. Yet the effect is cumulative. A photograph’s impact should not be judged in isolation but as part of a larger cultural effort of which it is a part. Art makes a space for belief; and belief makes a space for change.

THE MICROSCOPE

Leaving aside their pensive qualities, Gielen’s photographs offer a number of concrete insights with respect to ecology and unsustainable growth, which complement the action they perform upon belief in the possibility of catastrophe. The most salient piece of information, which is available in every one of the featured images in this book, is the artificiality of the quasi-urban forms and the lack of systemic consideration for the surrounding environment. The developments strike us first and foremost as impositions, as inva-

sions. They are manifestly unecological in the sense that an ecology is defined by relationships between entities within a given system and thrives on diversity. These landscapes are monocultural in every sense.

These developments seem like impositions because the edges are so hard. There is such an absolute boundary between these forms and the surrounding land (if such land can even be seen). This is particularly striking in the series *UNTITLED XII/IV/XII* from Nevada, where the microchip-shaped development has been carved into the desert landscape and seemingly walled off from it. What accommodation has there been made in this development for the power of the sun (such as solar panels or even passive solar constructions), which is surely the dominant feature of that ecosystem? What space has been given over to harvest scant water resources? Even where so-called natural features such as water or green space have been factored into the design, as in the *UNTITLED X/XII/XI* series from Arizona, there is no effort to integrate those features into the domestic areas, but rather these features too are pushed into symmetrical “design” forms that are purely decorative.

The unsustainable nature of the developments can be seen in the contrast between Gielen’s images of the Florida developments (*Sterling Ridge* and *Sky Isle*) and his images of the nearby Everglades. The Everglades refers to a vast system of wetlands that at one time encompassed nearly all of Florida, but which has since been canalized, drained, and diminished to the point of possible collapse in order to make way for housing developments and agriculture. Gielen published his images of the Everglades with *The New York Times* in a written piece and slideshow co-authored with Tim Doody.

Here is Doody describing the images:

*...the effects of sprawl were written all over the terrain: marshes reduced to a fraction of their former size; shrinking river-delta channels, known as sloughs; and the infamous “white zone,” a stagnant, hyper-salinated coastal area that has crept inland from the Atlantic since 1940. All of these are indicators of a dying ecosystem, driven to collapse by overdevelopment.*¹⁰

Gielen’s photographs are explicitly marshaled here for the purpose of illustrating a very clear point: the Everglades are endangered due to poor land management decisions, but have a chance to rebound with new legislation and newfound

concern for their stewardship on both the state and federal level.

One of the experts brought in to interpret the images for this piece, former United States Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, declares, “The land is crying out for water.” Gielen’s photographs of the Everglades gain contrast especially when put side-by-side against such glib uses of water as a landscape feature in the so-called Sky Isle development, which is actually in Naples, Florida, a city carved out of the wilderness in the late nineteenth century and currently a jumping-off point for tourism in what is left of the Everglades.

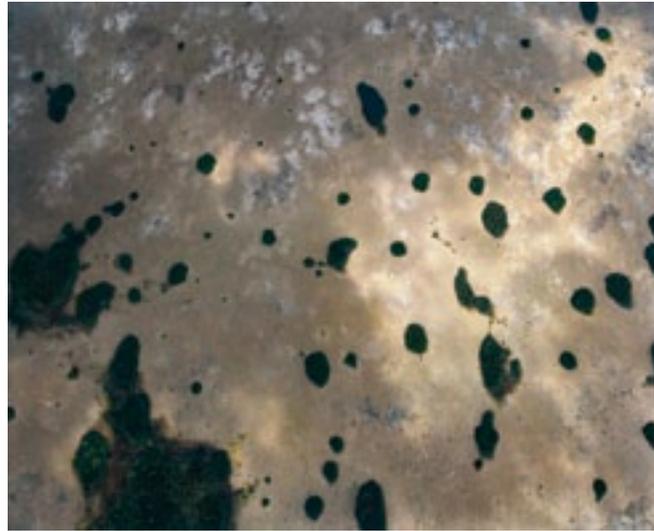
Another piece of concrete information that we can glean from the images, particularly those in the *Outer Houston* series, is the size of the houses. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, the average size of houses in the United States has more than doubled in the last seventy years, growing from 1,100 square feet in the 1940s to a new record high of 2,306 square feet in 2012. The amount of space on the planet is finite. So rising population coupled with rising demands for per capita land use is obviously not a sustainable formula. Various entities have speculated on “how many planets” the size of the earth we would need if all people of the world lived like North Americans. A recent calculation put that number at 4.1.¹¹ While such exact calculations are obviously fraught with assumptions and are estimates at best, the underlying point is valid. We just can’t do it. So something has to give.

DEVELOPING WORLD

The unsustainability of current growth trajectories becomes particularly obvious when we consider China, India, and the developing world. Are we supposed to tell the people of the developing world that they are not entitled to the comforts and lifestyle we have been enjoying? That does not seem just, but what are our alternatives? China is a particularly vexing case. Everything about the scale of China is terrifying, like a huge wave about to break upon the shore. According to a 2007 study, it builds two coal plants a week (a week!) and brings online an electricity capacity comparable to the entire UK power grid each year.¹² China already has five cities larger than New York (several of which you have probably never heard of) and by 2025 it “will have 221 cities with one mil-



SUBTROPICAL WATERSHED IV Florida



SUBTROPICAL WATERSHED II / III Florida

lion-plus inhabitants—compared with 35 cities of this size in Europe today.”¹³ The largest building in the world, which is located in Chengdu, was recently opened. This building, called The New Century Global Center, is four times the size of the Vatican and “features an artificial sun that provides light and heat throughout the day, while an LED screen 164 yards in length provides an artificial horizon,” according to one article on the building.¹⁴

Yet of all the staggering statistics with respect to China the most relevant to this book is the jaw-dropping plan of the Chinese government to relocate by fiat no less than 250 million people from rural to urban areas (and areas often explicitly developed for this relocation process). They plan to accomplish this in twelve to fifteen years. Think about this for a moment: 250 million people is equal to the entire population of the United States in 1990 (the population of the United States now is around 313 million). Can you imagine the forced relocation of an entire country? Furthermore, the matter is not as simple as a physical relocation. What is intended is no less than an entire lifestyle makeover. The reason China is relocating people is “mainly to find a new source of growth for a slowing economy that depends increasingly on a consuming class of city dwellers,” according to a recent report in *The New Times*.¹⁵ To support its continued growth, which is the de facto and unquestioned aim of nearly all world governments today, China needs more people—a lot more people—buying televisions and cars and

computers and sneakers and baseball caps. No anecdote more clearly exposes the need to overcome our faith in the everlasting benefits of continued growth. There is absolutely no way to reduce carbon emissions and thus to mitigate risk of complete catastrophe in such a political climate.

KONGJIAN YU AND THE ARTS OF SURVIVAL

We set out to answer a question that Gielen specifically posed to us: what good are these photographs in the face of climate change? But to put a finer point on it we might ask: what good are these photographs in the face of the central planning authority of the Chinese government, or the broken, polarized legislative system of the United States?

We have written at length about the potential cultural impact of projects like this book, and no matter how difficult it is to see in the moment, there is no question that a government’s power, even in China, derives from its people. Changing social realities, changing social concerns will ultimately change governments, either slowly or, if that change meets resistance, all at once and with violence. China, for example, is creating an extremely combustible situation within its borders through the forced migrations of its people, a prospect that may seem good in the short-term because of stipends offered by the government, but what happens when those stipends run out? Likewise the United States is creating a combustible situation by becoming increasingly myopic in its governance and by becoming increasingly focused on the

short-term profits of corporations instead of the long-term prosperity of its people. Gielen’s images (and literally thousands of like-minded projects) can help bring about a tipping point in consciousness.

In the meantime, Gielen’s images, because they are of actual places at an actual point in time, provide useful visual information immediately. The type of development seen in the images can be read as emblematic of archaic and dangerous land-use management and can provide concrete examples of what to avoid. These stagnant, resource-draining landscapes are an example that can be heeded by any government, any planning authority.

If such a prospect seems far-fetched, consider the work of Kongjian Yu. Yu is an influential thinker, planner, and landscape architect working within China. He is the founder and Dean of the School of Landscape Architecture at Peking University and the founder and head of Turenscape—a 500-person design firm that implements multiple projects each year, almost entirely within China itself. In a recent interview, Yu defined what he sees as the future of landscape architecture and planning as follows:

*We’ve misunderstood what it means to be developed. We need to develop a new system, a new vernacular to express the changing relationship between land and people.... It should address the issue of survival, not pleasure making, or ornament. It should be for survival, because we are now, as human beings, at the edge of survival.*¹⁶



DROUGHT II/IV/I Florida

For Yu, a survival-focused planning and development practice is fundamentally based on “ecological awareness and environmental ethics.”¹⁷ By which he means: “like a successful organism, a place will sustain its identity when its design is adaptive—when it responds elegantly and efficiently to its environmental setting so that new uses can endure.”¹⁸ Notably, Yu begins his analysis of a given project with aerial views and then zooms in. He is looking for what he calls “ecological infrastructure that will guide urban development.” Yu defines ecological infrastructure as “the structural landscape network composed of critical landscape elements and spatial patterns.”¹⁹ In other words, everything that was ignored in the developments that Gielen highlights in this book. Indeed, Yu’s expressed point of departure is the realization that China cannot urbanize to the extremes it is currently planning on, if it employs the very type of lifestyle and development ethos exhibited in Gielen’s landscapes.

Because Gielen works with photography’s intrinsic indexicality rather than try to outwit it, as many contemporary art photographers seem intent to do, his images can function as raw data with which urban planners like Yu can compare and contrast. In this way, his photography not only works on belief in the manner expressed above (jarring us loose from an unquestioned faith in unlimited growth), but also on knowledge, by giving us concrete information about real places in real time. Gielen’s images exert both bottom-up and top-down pressure on a changing culture. Each of the

other essays in this book, but most particularly the work of Galina Tachieva, show what can be done with a specific analysis of Gielen’s forms.

Of course, most readers of this book will not be professionals of the sort to make elaborate use of Gielen’s images. So what will you do with the information he provides? Only you know and you may not know yet. The ultimate value of the images depends entirely on the viewer living up to her end of the civic bargain.

Susannah Saylor and Edward Morris

¹ See: William R. L. Anderegg, James W. Prall, Jacob Harold, and Stephen H. Schneider, 2010. “Expert credibility in climate change.” *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 107 [27]: 12107–9; J. Cook, D. Nuccitelli, S. A. Green, M. Richardson, B. Winkler, R. Painting, R. Way, P. Jacobs, A. Skuc, 2013. “Quantifying the consensus on anthropogenic global warming in the scientific literature.” *Environ. Res. Lett.* 8 [2]: 024024; Peter T. Doran and Maggie Kendall Zimmerman, January 20, 2009. “Examining the Scientific Consensus on Climate Change”. *EOS* 90 [3]: 22–23; and Naomi Oreskes, 2007. “The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change: How Do We Know We’re Not Wrong?” in Joseph F. C. DiMento and Pamela M. Doughman, *Climate Change: What It Means for Us, Our Children, and Our Grandchildren*. MIT Press. pp. 65–66.

² From a book proposal for: Thomas Nocke and Birgit Schneider (eds.), *Image Politics of Climate* (working title), Bielefeld: transcript, 2013.

³ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 177–189.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London: Verso, 2011, 445–446.

⁵ The term negative capability was coined by John Keats who defined it as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” The term was later appropriated by social theorist Roberto Unger, who gave the following definition: “denial of whatever in our contexts delivers us over to a fixed scheme of division and hierarchy and to an enforced choice between routine and rebellion.” Roberto Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy, Revised Edition*, London: Verso, 2004, pp. 279–280, 632.

⁶ Laura Kurgan, *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology & Politics*, Zone Books, 2013, as found in Trevor Paglen’s review of the book, “Ways of Seeing,” in *Book Forum*, April/May 2013, p. 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Erroll Morris, *Believing Is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography*. New York: Penguin Press, 2011.

⁹ Kim Sichel, *To Fly: Contemporary Aerial Photography*, Boston University Art Gallery, 2007, p. 11.

¹⁰ Tim Doody and Christoph Gielen, “They Unpaved Paradise,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2010.

¹¹ Patrick James, “What would Happen If the Entire World Lived Like Americans?” *Fast Company*, <http://www.fastcoexist.com/1680379/what-would-happen-if-the-entire-world-lived-like-americans>, August 2012, date accessed: June 22, 2013.

¹² J. Deutch and E. Moniz. *The Future of Coal—Options for a Carbon-Constrained World*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, p. ix. Available at <http://web.mit.edu/coal/>.

¹³ McKinsey Global Institute, “Preparing for China’s Urban Billion: Executive Summary,” 2009.

¹⁴ Brian Bishop, “World’s largest building opens in China complete with artificial sun,” *The Verge*, <http://www.theverge.com/2013/7/3/4491630/worlds-largest-building-opens-in-china-complete-with-artificial-sun>, July 3, 2013.

¹⁵ Ian Johnson, “China’s Great Uprooting: Moving 250 Million Into Cities,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2013.

¹⁶ American Society of Landscape Architects, “Interview with Kongjian Yu, Designer of the Red Ribbon, Tang He River Park,” <http://www.asla.org/contentdetail.aspx?id=20124>, accessed July, 2013.

¹⁷ Kongjian Yu, “The Big-Foot Revolution,” in Mohsen Mostafavi, with Gareth Doherty, Harvard University Graduate School of Design (eds.), *Ecological Urbanism*, Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2010, p. 286.

¹⁸ Kongjian Yu, “The Big Feet Aesthetic and the Art of Survival,” *Architectural Design*, 11/2012, Volume 82, Issue 6, pp. 72–77.

¹⁹ Yu, “The Big-Foot Revolution,” p. 284.



DROUGHT Florida