Hellbound, Simon Baker, Curator of Photography and International Art, Tate Modern, London

Hell was founded by Charles Carr in 1954. As of 1958, Carr, his wife, and their ten-year-old son Terry were the only inhabitants. Carr also served as the lone member of Hell's Chamber of Commerce. Hell was abandoned in the late 1950s or early 1960s when it was isolated by the construction of US Highway 60 and 70. Its remains were demolished and burned by the California State Division of Highways in late 1964, to make way for what would eventually become Interstate 10. Prior to its demise Hell had a service station, a beer tavern, and a good supply of drinking water. According to the one authority on the subject, since Hell was consigned to oblivion it has been "impossible for anyone to go to Hell in Riverside County."[1]

Mark Ruwedel went through Hell to make this book, (probably several times), passed many Devils Gates, smoked stogies in Hells Half Acre, and took in the view from the Devils Lookout. For since the mid-1990s, in the course of making his prolific, often encyclopedic photographic accounts of the traces of different kinds of impacts on the land, Ruwedel has been engaged in a particular parallel mission, to visit and photograph those sites which previous generations of travelers and settlers saw fit to christen with the darkest names: Helltown, Devils Garden, Hells Hollow, Devils Lane, Diablo Canyon and so on.

Ruwedel, however, is not obsessed with Hell. He *is* obsessed with many things; pulp fiction, abandoned vinyl, Ed Ruscha, girls with guitars, rayguns, Spiral Jetty, and palm trees, but not Hell.[2] But in attending in an almost absent-minded way to the peculiarities of this specific geographic nominalism, Ruwedel has taken his exploration and documentation of man's relationship with the landscape beyond evidence of physical impact (the cuts, grades, and tunnels blasted by the expansion of the railroads, or the craters made by bombing practice), and toward the wild spaces of the imagination. Ruwedel's interest in picturing Hell is a fascinated but strangely somehow also disinterested aspect of a wider practice that, since the mid-1980s, has developed into one of the most coherent and fully thought- through bodies of photographic work since those of Lewis Baltz or Bernd and Hilla Becher, the archetypes of so-called New Topographic photography.[3] To fully understand the significance of *Pictures of Hell* as a project made in the shadows of other projects, however, it is important not only to consider the context of Ruwedel's recent practice, but also its overall nature and character: a seemingly insatiable appetite for the variety and strangeness of the North American West, from its sublime natural landscape to the absurdly optimistic attempts to conquer it, whether literally or metaphorically.

Westward: The Course of Empire perhaps best exemplifies the balance in Ruwedel's work between the ambition and scope of a totalizing project and the prosaic nature of the artist's practice.[4] An inventory of the incredible landforms and ruins resulting from abandoned attempts at railroad construction (whether completed or not) in the American and Canadian West, *Westward* was accomplished initially by walking and driving these routes and thereby learning the complexities and nuances of the landscapes left behind. And although Ruwedel was acting, in some senses at least, as a kind of photographic troubadour of an untold (or forgotten) story, the aesthetic co-ordinates of his practice worked against the normative conventions of his subject matter. Channeling both his nineteenth-century forebearers, Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan, and the more recent conceptual land-art practices of Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson, Ruwedel's project is at once monumental and at war with the monumentality of the landscape sublime (more Robert, than Ansel, Adams).[5] The de-sublimation at work in the production of the spaces depicted (in which apparently pristine natural wonders are quite literally cut to pieces) is replicated by Ruwedel in the presentation of these spaces as series (in publications), and grid-like formations (for exhibition), so that in place of the expected marveling at human endeavor - how on earth one might cut through a mountain only to abandon the project - the viewer is asked to consider whether it is still marvelous if this exercise has been repeated twelve (or more) times. And although Ruwedel is open in his own description of the railroad companies' abortive enterprise as 'staggering,' he seems at the same time, (while reeling from his own attempt to comprehend it) to overreach this ambition with his own dogged insistence on recuperating these actions in the service of a new politics of topographic representation.[6] It is as though what could be achieved with dynamite and hard-labor might make sense only in relation to an understanding of the landscape both *before* and *after* these brutal interventions. It is here in Ruwedel's practice that the logical correlate of Smithson's *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* is beamed backwards into the nineteenth century – a retrospective illumination that is blatantly anachronistic but revelatory nevertheless.[7] Just as Smithson 'identifies' or 'nominates' monumental forms in 1960s New Jersey (The Bridge Monument, The Monument With Pontoons, The Fountain Monument), structures that seem to 'rise into ruin before they are built', Ruwedel's *Westward* locates and designates what its author describes as a 'vast landscape of ruins' as monuments to the failed relationship between economic expansion and the environment.[8]

This same relationship, and indeed a similar mode of working, can be seen in Ruwedel's work in less obviously 'natural' environments, namely in the desert regions in and around California. Driving constantly in giant

looping tours from his base in Long Beach, often for days at a time, Ruwedel has produced an incredible catalog of the operating limit that divides optimism and hubris where domestic land use is concerned. But where *Westward* deals with monumental (if finally useless) interventions in the natural landscape, Ruwedel's *Desert Houses*, (and their associated sub-series in which dust-covered records, clothing and toys are documented like crime scene photographs), offer evidence of a faith in the human capacity to overcome the natural order that is almost completely belied by reality.[9] For the absent house-builders of the decrepit structures that Ruwedel finds and documents seem to have endured some deep Ballardian malaise, heading not away from, but ever further *into* the desert where temperatures rise, water evaporates and civilization becomes ever more scarce.[10] What Ruwedel takes from these wild, unaccommodating places, however, goes beyond a shallow laugh at the folly of those who have been defeated by them, and tends instead toward a deeper registering of the entropic power of the desert to recuperate its essentially inhospitable character, and bring everything back to an appropriate level of dusty equivalence. What is true of the houses, as they list and collapse like ships wrecked in the sand, is even truer of smaller personal effects like vinyl records, scattered, warped and always on the verge of being swallowed by the sun-shot dust. While we might be familiar with the 'urgent' tendency for photographers since Atget (and before) to attempt to document (often at a snail's-pace) what is about to disappear, with Ruwedel instead we have a photographer who is concerned with things that seem likely to decay more slowly and less completely than radiation, as though the bleached bones of these dead houses might enjoy a half-life spanning geological time.[11]

Just as the desert consumes these failures with a quiet, relentless ambivalence, Ruwedel's process likewise works in reverse, culminating in a determined accumulation of ruin- fragments that speak all the more eloquently as a result of their serial nature. As with the tunnels, cuts and grades that make up *Westward*, Ruwedel's *Desert Houses* belong with one another, drawn together by their shared character as markers of extreme topographic dysfunction. Their inter-dependence is something that Ruwedel insists upon both in his aesthetic, which draws upon a homogenizing approach to light, tone, texture, and in the frankness of the declaration of his conceptual framework. What is clear enough in a grid of twelve *Desert Houses* is even more obvious in Ruwedel's subsequent and related work *Neighbors*, in which uncanny identical twin desert structures, (doppelgangers seemingly embarrassed to have existed even once), sit side-by-side in photographic diptychs just as they do in the real world.[12] The sense of redundant futility is not only set out explicitly in this work, but implicitly too, in the shadow cast by the Ruwedel's wry humour: 'Once is bad luck', he seems to say, 'but twice is just careless.' For where *Desert Houses* might appear at least to be the result of an aimless wandering - architectural 'found objects' - *Neighbors* speaks to a practice that more openly declares its own conceptual basis. And nowhere is this clearer, perhaps, than in Ruwedel's elegant project *One Thousand Two Hundred Twelve Palms*, which comprises nine pictures of places whose names (Una Palma, Four Palms Spring, Seven Palms Valley, Twenty Nine Palms etc...) add up to the number 1212.[13] This oblique nod to Ed Ruscha, which takes its place alongside a series of Ruwedel projects that more openly re-skill the de-skilled originals (*Some Los Angeles Palms*, *We All Loved Ruscha: Fifteen Apartments*, *Opportunities Realized*) returns us to *Pictures of Hell* as a correlate of this same typological nominalism: 26 Hells, Every Hell on Sunset Strip, or Various Small Fires and Hell.[14]

Pictures of Hell, then, in addition to having been produced alongside, or between, series like *Westward* and *Desert Houses*, exists in direct conceptual and aesthetic relationships to both of these projects, each of which exposes a different set of relationships between human activity and the landscape. But what is striking in *Pictures of Hell* is that Ruwedel's attempt to 'account for' the enthusiasm of previous generations of Americans for baptizing places darkly (the preponderance of Devils and Hells) results not in a recognizable uniformity, but rather in a dissociated collection of photographs that have less to do with one another, in terms of objective content rather than photographic style, than any other example of Ruwedel's usually tightly focused series. There is a strange echo here of the dissembling 1930s proto-ethnographer Marcel Griaule's short essay *Pottery*, which uses photographic illustrations of radically different earthenware objects to suggest that if all these things could accurately be described as pottery, and somehow remain within the boundaries of the term, then the word itself could not, logically, continue to function.[15] And in a similarly categorically entropic strategy, *Pictures of Hell*, instead of 'describing' or claiming shared characteristics between its contents, constitutes instead a non-category of 'landscape' in all its variety and contradiction: less 'man-altered' than 'man-auraed'. For every sublime Devils Lookout, picturesque Devils Punchbowl, or bucolic Hells Hollow, is a shabby Helltown, sinister Hell Hole, or strangely anamorphic Devil's Parade Ground (complete, it would seem, with a rock version of Jeff Koons's flower puppy).

At first this series of contradictions might appear to raise the question of exactly what possessed previous generations of explorers and cartographers to attach such uniformly powerful symbolism to such radically different natural forms and spaces: a topographic correlate of Griaule's problem with 'pottery'. But thinking through Ruwedel's practice and its own particular representational strategies a second question quickly overtakes the first: namely, how has Ruwedel responded to this categorical problem in producing pictures of

the places to which these names have been given? If, for cultural, historic, religious, and other superstitious reasons, the original acts of naming were attempts somehow to extend a form of human authorship over natural spaces of complex diversity in geographical, geological, and aesthetic terms (whether places of beauty, danger, strangeness or banality), how does Ruwedel's work function by re-framing this nominal intervention?[16] It is here perhaps that the supposed neutrality of the New Topographers (something hotly contested by recent scholarship) rubs shoulders with the evident fascination of Smithson for the so-called 'monuments' of Passaic.[17] For what Ruwedel seems to be working within, due to his awareness of both nineteenth-century landscape and twentieth-century conceptual traditions, is a practice which through a second non-physical intervention, this time photographic rather than nominal, both confirms the place as part of its group while liberating it from its designated character. The results, Ruwedel's *Pictures of Hell*, are therefore resolutely concerned with the practical effects of photographic activity, the language and grammar of framing and picturing the landscape, in a way that runs counter to, and is in many cases even at odds with, the historic discourse which gave rise to the project itself. This is not simply to say that the names of places are excuses to make pictures (the logic of which would appear, superficially at least, to govern projects like *One Thousand Two Hundred Twelve Palms*), but rather that these specifically named sites can be made to exemplify specific aspects of Ruwedel's own photographic practice, which is so carefully attuned to the traces of previous activity on the ways in which we understand the landscape. If, to take one example, 'Devils Playground' seems a strangely heavy-handed, if poetic, way to characterize three completely different open spaces, then Ruwedel's uniformly dead-pan black and white photographic responses to this provocation, produced with great formal subtlety, precision, and restraint, remind us not only of the now mysterious earlier attempts to designate these spaces as other-worldly and sinister, but also to the distance that has opened up in the intervening years between this way of understanding the landscape and our own. In a sense then, like *Westward*, and *Desert Houses*, which picture both epic and quotidian failures to conquer the wilder spaces of the American West, Pictures of Hell likewise concerns the impossibility of a heroic attempt to master the natural world, albeit through a romantic discourse of hyperbolic naming that, like the town of Hell itself, was never likely to survive the spans of time over which landscapes endure.

It is worth returning, in this context, to Smithson's description, in *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, of what he calls "the discredited idea of time and many other 'out of date' things."[18] Smithson's monuments are everyday forms designated as monumental only within the confines of a text which records the performative act of the author's 'tour'; a monumentality, which, Smithson is keen to point out, is intrinsically linked to their status as 'ruins in reverse.' In this light, then, we might also see Ruwedel's *Pictures of Hell* as the result of a tour undertaken by an artist, but this one aiming to re-locate monuments designated (named) as such over generations, the ruins of which are produced, in reverse as it were, as they are re-framed and pictured in the present.