

*'As if one's eyelids had been cut away'*  
*Frederick Sommer's Arizona Landscapes*

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Fig. 1. Frederick Sommer, *Arizona Landscape*, 1943, photograph © 2008 Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

*Arizona Landscape* is the factual, neutral title given by Frederick Sommer to a series of photographs he made in the early 1940s (Fig. 1). Exploiting the clinical, dispassionate eye of the large format plate camera, Sommer selects and frames sections of the desert, an expanse of nondescript rocks and scrub, irregularly punctuated by vertical strokes of cacti. The surface of the land rises to the surface of the photograph and eliminates the sky. Though the pictures' textures are crisp and hard, the overall tone is a mid-grey and no single form dominates any other. The eye

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must find its own path scanning these pictures—one route no better than any other—and there is no place for it to rest.

Such an account might run close to formalism, sounding an echo of Clement Greenberg's reading of the "all-over" paintings of Jackson Pollock: "It is the tension inherent in the constructed, recreated flatness of the surface that produces the strength of his art."<sup>1</sup> Although Sommer's *Arizona Landscapes* have sometimes been related to Pollock's paintings, the photographs significantly predate Pollock's "all-over" work of the late forties. Sommer's response to this in a 1980 interview was that Pollock made the pictures by "going through procedures that just gave him a greater density and greater occupancy of the area of concern. Well, that is something that comes automatic in the photograph."<sup>2</sup>

But there is more going on in these pictures and, for Sommer, these formal, pictorial devices were at the service of a set of uncomfortable meanings:

For years I looked at the Arizona landscape and it seemed almost a hopeless task ... There wasn't anything worth featuring, nothing worth making a to-do about. It was just like a situation where everybody was in trouble. All those plants were dry and dead and dying. And, if they weren't, you could take them as a whole, in their totality ... there's a great deal going on. Maybe this helped me to realize that I was also looking at details. These were enormous areas, but still there were details ... There's nothing in the sky and I decided, "No skies for me." Finally, there was no foreground, there was no middle distance, there was nothing. And, there was very little distinction between the plants and the rocks. Even the rocks were struggling.<sup>3</sup>

Sommer's lengthy statement emphasizes the way in which these pictures, so apparently resolved and clear, derive from and express an irresolution: a melange of pictorial intuitions mixed with a sense of the landscape as something utterly "other": a "place that exists for itself."<sup>4</sup> Embedded in that flat, even surface, there is a sense of desolation and unknowability. There is no place to hide here—from the sun or from the scrutiny of the camera. The surface of the land, rendered so evidently, photographically present, is at the same time a sort of no-place, with "no atmosphere that would amount to anything ... practically a lunar landscape."<sup>5</sup> "There was nothing."

Yet there is also too much. The density and close tonalities of the monochrome image makes it impossible to distinguish figure from ground—if that distinction even makes any sense here. As the eye crawls across the precisely delineated surface of both landscape and photograph, it comes to be, almost

physically, irritated with the abundance of detail, the endless repetition, the overwhelming, relentless accretion of sheer information, with no order imposed nor indeed possible.

Within this overall effect, however, are various ways in which these images work. I have seen some eleven different photographs in several publications entitled *Arizona Landscape*, made between 1941 and 1947, though 1943 is their moment of greatest concentration.<sup>6</sup> They vary in the distance the camera is set up from the landscape, in the sense of rhythm and flow that move through the pictures, and in the varying relationship of rocks, scrub and cacti within them (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Frederick Sommer, *Arizona Landscape*, 1945, photograph © 2008 Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

Yet all these pictures share a persistent and intense anonymity, in that they differ from other photographs by Sommer that have similar visual qualities. The tactic of eliminating the sky was one he had employed as early as 1939, and a series of pictures made at the Grand Canyon in 1940 also utilizes the technique.<sup>7</sup> But of course the very fact that they are made at one of the most sublime and famous natural sites in the world gives those images a distinctly different feeling than the anonymous *Arizona Landscapes*. With a few other pictures, Sommer added a place name as a title that also affects the reading of the image—*Bloody Basin* (1943) is a good example.<sup>8</sup> There are also other photographs that relate very clearly to the *Arizona Landscapes*, but which include signs of human habitation, either precarious (as in *Constellation*) or aggressive (*Goldmine*).<sup>9</sup> These intrusions interrupt the dense natural materiality of the desert landscape. Of *Goldmine*, wrote Mark Haworth-

Booth: “A strange flower opens in the desert. Sommer seems to note that equally it is a scar, a vulva, and a new kind of landscape.”<sup>10</sup> This final point about the “newness” of Sommer’s vision of the desert is something to which I will return.

Sommer’s *Arizona Landscapes* entered the discourse of Surrealism in 1944, when two were reproduced in *VVV*, the magazine of the surrealist exiles in New York (Fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> Edited by the young photographer David Hare, its editorial board comprised the formidable triumvirate of André Breton, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst. The landscapes selected were those with the greatest intensity of all-over small detail, and the effect of mental irritation and claustrophobia in those chosen



Fig. 3 Page spread from *VVV*, 4 (Feb 1944), 54-5. © 2008 Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

were greatest. This was emphasised in the way they were reproduced. Moving through the portrait-format journal, one confronts a double-page spread as the page is turned, which is initially disorienting. One has to turn the journal through ninety degrees so that the two landscape images sit one above the other, each full-page, with no text and no margins. In effect, the two images bleed into each other to act as one photograph, a single wall of rock and scrub.<sup>12</sup> As Dawn Ades wrote, the editors of *VVV* recognized in Sommer’s photographs “a genuine and original extension of the surrealist concept of convulsive beauty” and, as so often in surrealist magazines, saw how that could be reinforced by its presence on the page.<sup>13</sup>

It was Max Ernst who connected Sommer and the New York Surrealists. He and Sommer had met in 1941 when both were visiting Beverly Hills. Subsequently, in 1943, when Ernst was living with Dorothea Tanning on a ranch near Sedona—about 60 miles from Prescott, where Frederick and Frances Sommer lived—they renewed the connection when Ernst selected the images for publication in *VVV*. In the Sommer Archive at the Center for Creative Photography, in Tucson, Arizona, a little series of letters pins down the sequence of events. Ernst sent a postcard from Sedona to Sommer on September 6: “Dear Mr Sommer, Are you still living in Prescott? If so, may I see you one day?” Sommer evidently responded positively and, on October 14, Ernst sent another postcard (both are of the Petrified Forest): “I would like to come this Saturday if it is convenient for you. Will be there at about noon.” A month later, on November 13, Ernst wrote from New York, asking Sommer to “mail to me as soon as possible the picture we choised [sic] to be reproduced in *VVV* magazine.” Finally, on April 24, 1944, he told Sommer the magazine had finally been published and that his pictures “look[ed] very beautiful.”<sup>14</sup>

Ernst’s experience of Arizona led him in 1946 to go with Dorothea Tanning to live in Sedona. Many friends, including Marcel Duchamp, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Man Ray visited them there, and it’s interesting to speculate which of these visitors the Sommers met. Certainly, as described below, they saw Yves Tanguy and



Fig. 4. Frederick Sommer, *Max Ernst*, 1945, photograph © 2008 Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

his wife Kay Sage when they were in Sedona, and likewise met Roland Penrose and Lee Miller when they visited in July 1946.<sup>15</sup> Penrose later described Ernst's particular attachment to the Arizona landscape: "the surroundings were astonishingly like the most fantastic landscapes Max had painted before ever seeing the Wild West. It was as though he had designed the great red mountains and canyons himself."<sup>16</sup>

Also in 1946, Sommer made his often-reproduced portrait of Ernst, printing two negatives together to immerse Ernst in a roughcast wall with a textural quality reminiscent of the *Arizona Landscapes* (Fig. 4). As Margery Mann wrote, "The print is wonderfully ambiguous. Are we seeing a wall through a transparent man? Or is the solidity of the wall an illusion? Is there perhaps a wall-patterned window that stands between Max Ernst and the camera? Is the man human or is he really made of weathered stone? In this photograph, I saw, I believe for the first time, the same kind of ambiguity that exists in the paintings of some of the European Surrealists, for example Chirico, Yves Tanguy, and Rene Magritte."<sup>17</sup> Ernst himself liked the portrait so much that he used it on the invitation card for his major exhibition at the Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1947, and later books on Ernst often reproduced it.

The friendship between Ernst and Sommer was important for both men, and when Ernst was in Sedona they would see each other frequently. It is only speculation as to whether Sommer's work influenced Ernst's sense of the Arizona landscape, but there are some intriguing clues in comments made by Dorothea Tanning many years later in her autobiography *Between Lives*. While not in fact mentioning Sommer at all, her description of the desert landscape sounds an intense echo of his images: "In that camera-sharp place where the only electricity was in such thunderous lightning, there were no sounds in the afternoon save the hum of the heat. It was so intense, so lurking, so aged . . . a ground ancient and cruel with stones, only stones, and cactus spines playing possum."<sup>18</sup>

Sommer himself later expressed his own admiration for Ernst in unequivocal terms: "a great artist whose vision has that angelic restlessness of Solomon, frightening to facile partisans of thought or of instinct."<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, the example of Ernst did come to influence Sommer, most obviously in the photographed collages that he made in the late forties, using parts of 19th-century engravings, as Ernst had done in his collage novels of the early thirties. Likewise, in Sommer's later experiments with soft-focus, with photographing the effects of smoke on glass or shapes created in cut-paper, one may trace something of the influence of Man Ray. He and Sommer also first met in California in 1941, and Sommer later called Man Ray "a pioneer in the inter-relationship between the arts"—an inter-relationship that Sommer himself wanted to explore.<sup>20</sup>

These manipulated, experimental photographs—full of found objects and

collage effects—are the Sommer images that seem most obviously surrealist. It is evident that, for Sommer, there was no distinction between different types of images: “What difference is there between what you find and what you make? You have to find it to make it. You only find things that you already have in your mind.”<sup>21</sup> Respecting Sommer’s own egalitarian sense of the different aspects of his work, one must, in discussing his relationship with Surrealism, be careful not to privilege those areas of his work that “look” most surrealist. But, I would argue, it is precisely because the *Arizona Landscapes* are so “straight”—indeed, determinedly, unnervingly so—that they remain among the most compelling, disturbing—and surrealist—images he made.

Sommer’s background was extraordinarily cosmopolitan. He was born in 1905 in Italy to a German father and a Swiss mother, but the family moved to Brazil in 1913 to further his father’s landscape planning business. Frederick went to the United States in 1925 to study architecture at Cornell, where he met his wife Frances. They went back to Rio where he began to practice as an architect. Then in 1930, Sommer discovered he had contracted tuberculosis and went to Switzerland to recover. He and Frances returned to the States late in 1931, intending to settle in California. But travelling across the country, they stopped off in Tucson and, attracted by what Sommer later referred to as the “surreal quality” of the landscape, they decided to stay.<sup>22</sup> In 1935, they settled in Prescott, where they lived until they died within three months of each other in 1999. So, although he lived in Arizona for over sixty years, Sommer himself was originally an outsider, for whom the desert was something strange. “I had come out of the very lush environment of the tropics, where everything is covered by rich, well watered soil, but here, for eons, everything had been exposed ... If you want to photograph you’ve got to deal with what there is, and I began to see there was more, by far, than at first you might think.”<sup>23</sup>

Sommer certainly knew of Surrealism before he met the Surrealists, but it is difficult to pin down the specific ways in which Surrealism had affected him. Dawn Ades suggested one intriguing and perhaps surprising source for the *Arizona Landscapes*: Marcel Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, as photographed by Man Ray, lying flat in a New York studio, “breeding” dust. Indeed, the phrase that accompanied the photograph when first published in the Dada magazine *Littérature* would be appropriate for Sommer’s image of the desert: “How arid it is—how fertile it is ... .”<sup>24</sup> By the late thirties, Sommer certainly knew of Duchamp, and was making his own version of readymades. He later wrote: “What is the importance of Duchamp if not to tell us that the things that go on in painting can be done without painting.”<sup>25</sup>

Although Sommer always insisted on keeping a distance between his work and Surrealism, he did later comment that the Surrealists “had a great influence on

my work long before I met them. But after they saw my work, I influenced them.”<sup>26</sup> He then added: “In fairness, I cannot claim that they were influenced by seeing some of my things. They were influenced by seeing the Arizona desert and the West and the United States.” Perhaps it is not possible to disengage the experience of the desert and Sommer’s images from each other.

The example of Yves Tanguy is an interesting case in point. Tanguy soon visited Arizona after his arrival in the United States in 1940, and it is likely that Sommer himself had met Tanguy on a visit to New York in 1944; when, in 1951, Tanguy and his wife Kay Sage visited Ernst and Tanning in Arizona, they met again. Four years later, after Tanguy’s death, the Museum of Modern Art mounted a posthumous exhibition, and in the catalogue, J. T. Soby proposed a connection between Tanguy’s experience of the Arizona landscape and the “breathless congestion of boulders, pebbles or bones” in late Tanguy paintings, culminating with *Multiplication of the Arcs* (1954).<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, to illustrate the parallel, Soby reproduced one of Sommer’s *Arizona Landscapes*, and suggested that it may have been the image of that landscape, as depicted in Sommer’s photographs, that was as influential as the experience of the landscape itself. One might counter that the profusion of detail in Tanguy’s late paintings was not a sudden shift but a logical denouement towards which his work had been moving since the 1930s. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Tanguy was profoundly interested in both the Arizona landscape and Sommer’s images of it.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, though, an image like *Multiplication of the Arcs* is in fact not as radical as Sommer’s photographs; the bottom half of the picture may closely resemble one of the *Arizona Landscapes*, but above it is a horizon line that more conventionally divides the picture into land and sky.

In order to understand how truly radical Sommer’s *Arizona Landscapes* are, it is helpful to contrast them further with work and ideas within European Surrealism. Surrealism in Paris had been very securely sited within the city. But at the same time, there was a persistent fascination with the city’s “other”: nature at its most extreme—desert, forest and jungle. The only images of landscape created in Paris that begin to approach the unyielding vision of Sommer’s work are those originating in Spain—above all, the rocks of the Spanish coast at Cadaqués, as they appear in Salvador Dalí’s painting. (Memorably, that coastline had appeared near the beginning of Dalí and Luis Buñuel’s 1930 film *L’Age d’Or*.) However, even these landscapes cannot attain the starkness of the Arizona landscape as depicted by Sommer. Rather, in the search for an excessive and convulsive landscape, the Surrealists turned more often to the forest and to the jungle, sites of overgrowth rather than undernourishment.

Within painting, these sites appear most powerfully in Max Ernst’s *oeuvre*.



In the *Forest* paintings of the late twenties, one can see Ernst's relationship with the tradition of German Romanticism as represented by Caspar David Friedrich. Ernst himself, in an essay in *Minotaure*, saw this work as an escape from the restrictions of culture and civilization—into nature, the exotic and the unconscious.<sup>29</sup> However, by the mid-thirties, the mythical resonance of the jungle paintings—for example, the two versions of *Lust for Life* (1936) —joined with a potent political symbolism. Civilization has been “petrified” and the barbarians tramp through these landscapes. For Ernst, then—and we may say for Surrealism generally— the unrestrained excesses of nature are an initial liberation from the limitations of culture, yet there is also a potential threat of destruction.

As André Breton worked around his conjuration of “convulsive beauty” in his 1937 book *L'Amour Fou*, he referred to a photograph that he said he was unable to reproduce: that of a great locomotive abandoned and now trapped in the jungle.<sup>30</sup> As Mary Ann Caws notes, “This picture is all the stronger for not being pictured.”<sup>31</sup> But the photograph did exist, and was reproduced later that same year in *Minotaure*, where it accompanied Benjamin Péret's text “La nature dévore le progrès

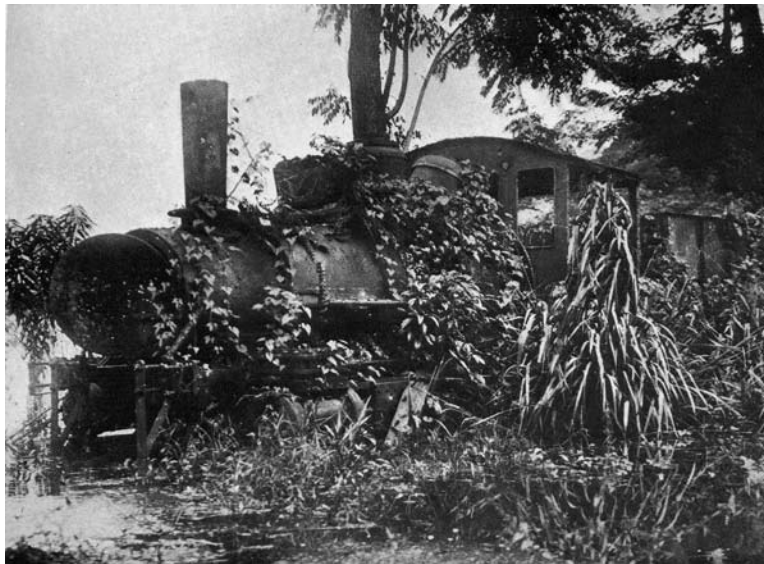


Fig. 5. Anonymous photograph reproduced in *Minotaure*, 10 (Winter 1937), 20

et le dépasse” (Fig. 5).<sup>32</sup> Thus, as the mechanical, the industrial, the cultural try to penetrate the “heart of darkness” at the base of existence, they find themselves consumed and overwhelmed. In the tension between nature and culture, the

Surrealists found the point of “convulsiveness”: a tension in the photograph that favours the natural but never resolves totally in its favour. The Surrealists needed their culture in order to desire nature; Sommer’s *Arizona Landscapes*, on the other hand, are *all* nature—at least until one recalls the beautifully crafted view camera with which the fine black and white pictures were made.

When we examine photographic images of natural forms actually made by Surrealists, something parallel happens. In the summer of 1936, the English Surrealist Eileen Agar shot a sequence of photographs of the extraordinary rock formations at Ploumanac’h on the north coast of Brittany.<sup>33</sup> Overwhelmed by the presence of these rocks, Agar simply cannot let them be. She anthropomorphizes them, giving them titles such as *Rockface* or *Bum and Thumb Rock*. It is in the tension between the brute “thereness” of the rocks and the often-humorous meaning she gives them that the work resides. What is important about Sommer’s *Arizona Landscapes* is that he precisely resists that assignment of meaning; the image is just what it is—a landscape in Arizona—and it has no other imposed meaning.<sup>34</sup>

Here, one can usefully introduce one other concept from Parisian Surrealism that can be related to Sommer’s work—the idea of the *terrain vague*.<sup>35</sup> Usually translated as either “no man’s land” or “waste land,” in European culture these already loaded phrases go back to the Great War, or to T. S. Eliot’s related poem *The Waste Land*. *Terrain vague* has different connotations of formlessness and lack of definition. The *terrain vague*, an undefinable or uncategorizable landscape, partakes of both nature and culture, yet inhabits neither comfortably. In Paris in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *terrain vague* was particularly situated in the boundaries just beyond the area known as the “zone,” inhabited by the *zoumiers*—ragpickers who collected and disposed of the city’s waste. Memorable photographs taken by Eugène Atget record the chaos there without attempting to make order of it—indeed the lack of order is the point.

It is intriguing to place the concept of the *terrain vague* alongside Sommer’s use of an all-over, unfocused, undifferentiated composition. At the same time, as he was making his *Arizona Landscapes* in 1943, Sommer photographed a pile of broken glass in the same “all-over” way that he photographed the landscapes—a sort of human-made version of the “lunar landscape” that he found in the desert (Fig. 6).<sup>36</sup> One might then propose that in Sommer’s landscapes, we find another sort of *terrain vague*, as long as we regard this as a suggestive parallel rather than an influence. Nevertheless, we can relate Sommer’s particular version of that much-photographed place—the American West—to it. The first review, by an anonymous writer, of Sommer’s work in 1945 called him the photographer of the “anti-tourist West,” and quoted his reference to the “in-between-the-National Parks-country” that interested him.<sup>37</sup>

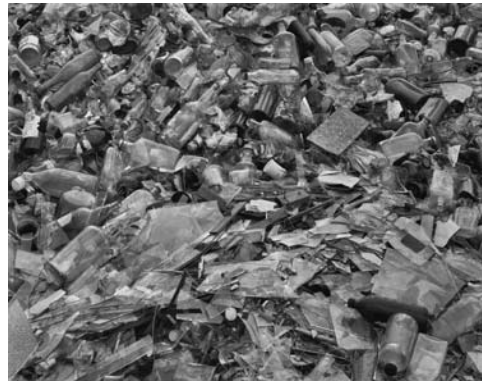


Fig. 6. Frederick Sommer, *Glass*, 1943, photograph © 2008 Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

The tradition of photography of the American West has been rich in both image making and myth-making. One of Sommer's most important influences was Edward Weston, whom he first met in 1936, and thereafter when Weston and his wife Charis visited Arizona in 1938. Sommer followed Weston's advice to buy a large format plate camera (10 x 8 in.), the basic instrument of photography in the West, with which he would make the *Arizona Landscapes*. But this was not only a technical decision: the use of the large format gives those photographs the hallucinatory sharpness of detail that is crucial to their power—an effect markedly different from the main body of surrealist photography. Sommer's place at the crossroads of Surrealism and the photography of the American West—between Max Ernst and Edward Weston—is unique; and his pictures are uniquely compelling in both contexts.

For a long time, the discussion of surrealist photography was dominated by the writings of Rosalind Krauss from the 1980s, in which she opposed it to the concept of the “straight” photograph that had ruled the photography of certain American photographers of the thirties - most famously Edward Weston, Paul Strand and Ansel Adams—who emphasized authenticity and truth to materials. Surrealist photography, wrote Krauss, was “a betrayal of photography's vocation to constitute a faithful document”;<sup>38</sup> “surrealist photography is contrived to the highest degree,” and that contrivance is what scandalizes “Straight Photography”—the capitalization is Krauss'.<sup>39</sup>

Sommer's *Arizona Landscapes* decisively cut through any simple opposition of “straight” and “surrealist” photography. These photographs, we might say, are almost “straighter than straight,” or hyper-straight. Yet at the same time, Sommer would

probably have argued that they were also profoundly subjective images: “Reality is greater than our dreams,” he wrote, “yet it is within ourselves that we find the clues to reality.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, in these pictures, Sommer’s directness is at the service of a vision of the landscape that is at odds with the fundamentally positive view of the American West of many other photographers. Sommer’s work represents, as it were, the dark underbelly of American landscape photography. Where Ansel Adams, for example, was concerned with the sublime beauty of the places he photographed, Sommer, as we have seen, perceived a situation where “all those plants were dry and dead and dying ... Even the rocks were struggling.”

Edward Weston’s position was more complex than that of Adams: he could shift from formal minimalism to the uncomfortable, the comic and, indeed, the surreal.<sup>41</sup> When, in the late 1930s, Sommer began photographing chicken carcasses, Weston reacted with gusto, saying: “We enjoy your immortal chicken remains exceedingly.”<sup>42</sup> Both Weston and Sommer photographed death in the desert, but where Weston’s images most often are graceful and poised, Sommer’s are grotesque and compelling, offering no such comfort. Photographs of the bodies of dead animals found in the desert that he made in the early 1940s sit alongside the *Arizona Landscapes*; and they evince the same precise, brute exactness, even in the titling of the images: *Jack Rabbit* (1939), *Horse* (1945), *Coyotes* (1945) (Fig. 7). In a review published in *Art in America* in 1973, Jain Kelly contrasted what she called the “Apollonian purity” of Weston and Adams with the “Demonic evocations” of Sommer.<sup>43</sup> And she specifically argued that this difference had had important historical and ideological ramifications.

For a long period through the 1940s and 1950s, the history of photography was largely the one written by Beaumont Newhall in his classic study of 1938, carried through in subsequent editions. He and his wife Nancy were close friends and admirers of Weston and Adams, and their work took center stage in Newhall’s account of American landscape photography. They disliked Sommer’s work and omitted it, first mentioning it in the 1982 edition of the book.<sup>44</sup> When, in 1944, Sommer tried to interest then Acting Curator in MoMA’s Department of Photography Nancy Newhall in his work, she replied: “I sympathize, as who does not nowadays, with your preoccupation of the themes of destruction and disintegration and it seems to me that you are on the way to saying something about them which nobody else has said. I do feel, however, that if you can find it in yourself to develop a wider scope within these themes or to add a counterpoint of motive, it would be wise.”<sup>45</sup>

We cannot of course blame the Newhall’s for their personal taste, nor really for the fact that it was so influential as to temporarily deny Sommer his place in



Fig. 7. Frederick Sommer, *Coyotes*, 1945, photograph © 2008 Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

the history of photography. Through to the mid-1960s, Sommer's work stayed in the public eye only through his presence in *Aperture*, edited by Minor White, who published his work in 1956, 1961 and 1962.<sup>46</sup> Whenever it appeared, it stirred controversy. In the late sixties, however, his work began to be shown more widely, with major exhibitions in Washington (1965), Philadelphia (1968) and New York (1972). Even so, the weighty retrospective volume of a major photographer one would expect did not appear until 2005—six years after Sommer's death.<sup>47</sup>

We need to see this re-emergence of Sommer's photography around 1970 primarily in the context of the shifting understanding of the history of the American West as far more troubled and problematic than had previously been described. This re-writing of American history can be found in books—Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, published in 1970<sup>48</sup>—and perhaps above all, in the movies. The films of Sam Peckinpah, for instance, depict a violent and amoral West: the scorpions covered in swarming ants at the start of *The Wild Bunch* (1969); or the chickens' heads shot off at the start of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). These are, at least superficially, startlingly Sommeresque images. Peckinpah kicks against the essentially benign view of the American West of John Ford's classic films, in which gardens are made to bloom in the desert. In Sommer's photos, the desert remains a desert.

We find this shift towards a tougher, more uncomfortable West in still photography as well. In the 1970s, Timothy O'Sullivan was favoured above all other nineteenth<sup>th</sup>-century photographers of the West precisely because of his lack of romanticization. In his 1981 monograph on O'Sullivan, Joel Snyder wrote that many photographs "outreach the esthetic classification of their day because they verge upon being anesthetic—they stun and they numb."<sup>49</sup> This sounds like a description of the *Arizona Landscapes*.

Contemporary photographers were also taking a critical view of the myth of the West, among them, those associated with "New Topographics"—Robert Adams, Joe Deal and Lewis Baltz.<sup>50</sup> Rather than the sublimities depicted by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, these photographers flattened both the space and the affect of the landscape. In this, as Jonathan Green explained, Sommer's photographs were an important influence: "Sommer uses the camera as an objectifying, levelling device that transforms the land into a uniform flat surface."<sup>51</sup> Mark Haworth-Booth also related Lewis Baltz's tactics back to Sommer in his introduction to Baltz's 1986 book, *San Quentin Point*. Baltz, he wrote, "introduced into American photography an iconography of the disregarded—or 'unphotographable.'"<sup>52</sup> The disregarded aspects of the contemporary western landscape were precisely what then interested younger photographers, but with significant shifts in emphasis.

When Mark Klett photographed a cactus riddled with bullet holes in 1982, there *was* a connection with Sommer's vision of a landscape "where everybody was in trouble," but the differences were also important (Fig. 8).<sup>53</sup> The struggle that Sommer depicts is nature struggling with itself, as it always has done. The focus of these younger photographers on the violence done to the landscape by its human inhabitants returns us to a conflict between nature and culture. Its overall tone, largely a mixture of anger and irony, is not an emotion typical of Sommer's work.

This is particularly true of the set of pictures that at first sight seem most indebted to Sommer's example. In Richard Misrach's sequence *The Pit* of 1987-89, a part of his ongoing *Desert Cantos*, piles of dead horses and cattle are laid out in the middle of the desert. These images were made in the mid-1980s as part of Misrach's agenda to explore the residues of the military occupation of the American desert, above all during the Cold War.<sup>54</sup> Misrach suggests that these animals have died due to waterborne poisoning from radiation released by atomic tests conducted in the area.

The work of these photographers of the 1970s and 1980s raises the question of whether even the desert can stand beyond politics, because although this alien landscape is inherently antithetical to human culture, we cannot help but see it through the lens of that culture. We might be tempted in turn to throw the question



Fig. 8. Mark Klett, *Bullet-riddled saguaro, near Fountain Hills, Arizona, 11/21/82*, photograph © 2008 Mark Klett

back onto Sommer's landscapes—he was after all making these images of death and survival while a World War raged elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> When Max Ernst made his paintings of jungles, forests and petrified cities in the 1930s, their commentary on the rise of fascism was deeply embedded but unmistakable; might we not read the *Arizona Landscapes* in a similar way?

The connection is surely behind Nancy Newhall's comment quoted above: "I sympathize, as who does not nowadays, with your preoccupation of the themes of destruction and disintegration." Remember that in the title *VVV*, the magazine in which the *Arizona Landscapes* were first published, "V" stood for the reconciliation of "the View around us" with "the View inside us." But it also stood more exactly for "Victory over the forces of regression and death unloosed at present on the earth—victory over Fascism."<sup>56</sup> Finally, we might recall that, through the latter half of the war, the ultimate weapon of destruction was being designed elsewhere in the southwestern desert.

It is perhaps difficult in retrospect not to seek a connection between these contemporaneous expressions of annihilation; ironically, because the *Arizona Landscapes* so firmly exclude the outside world, it is all-the-more tempting to re-insert it. Nevertheless, while we cannot know whether, at some deep level in Sommer's own thinking, that connection existed, it is necessary to stress that, if it was, it was never

explicit and he never referred to it. Sommer had embarked on this way of working before war had been declared, and a long time before the first bomb was exploded in 1945; his own comments on the pictures always emphasize the natural process he is recording. The sense of death implicit in the *Arizona Landscapes* and explicit in his photographs of animal corpses was not, Sommer would have insisted, a negative force. Already the horse, coyote and jackrabbit seem to be merging back into the earth, part of an endless and natural cycle of life into death and death into life.

Sommer's images of dead animals are, like the *Arizona Landscapes*, simultaneously cool and disturbing—at once forensic and aesthetic, presenting the forms both “as themselves,” and as “something other” as both terrible and beautiful. Mark Haworth-Booth remarked of these photographs that “the abattoir syndrome of Surrealism meets Westonian technique [in them]” to create real “exquisite corpses.”<sup>57</sup> One of his references here is to a set of photographs made by Eli Lotar at the Paris abattoir, published in *Documents* in 1929, with a text by George Bataille (Fig. 9).<sup>58</sup> Again, those images occupy the *terrain vague* between nature and culture—creatures on their way from the raw to the cooked.

But this also is something of a misleading comparison. As Sommer told an interviewer in 1981, “I have never been interested in the disposing of life.”<sup>59</sup> Rather, he seems to have been concerned with a steady state where life and death merge; and his attitude was one of acceptance: “Those things exist and you might say this was homage to existence as it is.”<sup>60</sup> “If you walk round the desert or drive around certain areas of Arizona or the West,” said Sommer, “you run into the kinds of things I photograph—that’s natural.”<sup>61</sup>

Undoubtedly the most extreme photograph that Sommer ever made was his 1939 picture of an amputated foot (Fig. 10). It had belonged to a hobo who lost it sleeping on the railroad tracks; Sommer obtained it from his physician. As with that other icon of surrealist mutilation, the cut eye in *Un Chien Andalou*, one initially reels back appalled, then leans forward in intense fascination. It is fascination that is again both “forensic”—in its evident resemblance to medical photography—and “aesthetic.”<sup>62</sup> After the initial revulsion, one might revel in the beautiful glazes of the flesh, the luscious gleam of the photograph itself. But, at the same time, like the cutting of the eye, the image attacks the viewer with a sense of arbitrariness, as if thrown into a vacuum of amorality.

A cool, precise and unflinching gaze at a powerfully physical, yet morally senseless subject—this is the quality that Sommer's images of death and mutilation share with the *Arizona Landscapes*. Art, Sommer told Studs Terkel, is an “anti-moral” procedure;<sup>63</sup> and “photography is an acceptance of the landscape, which exists for itself.”<sup>64</sup> All the viewer can do is stare at the image as the camera has stared, as the





Fig. 9. Eli Lotar, *Aux abattoirs de La Villette*, 1929, photograph reproduced in *Documents*, 1:6 (November 1929), 327



Fig. 10. Frederick Sommer, *Untitled (Amputated Foot)*, 1939, photograph © 2008 Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

photographer has stared. Sommer shows “what is there”; and it seems too much and results in a quality of hallucination.

Finally then, alongside Buñuel’s sliced eye, one might place another evocation of vision combining clarity and violence. This is the comment made in 1810 by the German writer Heinrich von Kleist about another bleak, seemingly empty landscape, Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *Monk by the Sea*: “Since in its uniformity and boundlessness, it has no other foreground than the frame, when one looks at it, it is as if one’s eyelids had been cut away.”<sup>65</sup>

## II

The Prints and Drawings Study Room at the Victoria and Albert Museum is a high-ceilinged space with wide tables covered in green leather. On one side, three tall windows look out across the roof of the museum, beyond which the treetops of South Kensington glow in the late summer sun. Anyone can come here, sign in and order what they want; the young couple over there are looking at photos by Lady Hawarden, while the elderly man in the other corner seems to be perusing some 18th-century garden designs. I am here to look at their collection of photographs by Frederick Sommer. In a month or so, I’ll be in Arizona to deliver a paper on his *Arizona Landscapes*. I’ve just been over in the library looking at their reproduction in a fragile and faded copy of *VVV*; now I want to see some of the actual prints.

While I wait for them to arrive, I try to remember the first time I saw Sommer’s work. It was the late 1970s, but where and when I’m not sure. At that moment, interest in both surrealist photography and the photography of the American West (represented, most recently, by New Topographics) were developing, and it could have been in either context—or both simultaneously. The first precise date I can recall is 1978, when the large and influential exhibition “Dada and Surrealism Reviewed” was mounted in London at the Hayward Gallery. The show laid a new emphasis on the central role of the journal in Surrealism and, in Section 15 of the catalogue on Surrealism in America in the forties, the spread of the *Arizona Landscapes* in *VVV* was reproduced.<sup>66</sup> The exhibition itself included three photographs by Sommer—one of his “forensic” photographs of chicken entrails and two of the landscapes.<sup>67</sup>

In 1980, I spent a couple of months in the United States, conducting initial research for what I didn’t know then would be a longstanding exploration of surrealist photography. I took the opportunity to see what prints by Sommer were available in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and George Eastman House in Rochester. At the latter institution, I had my most visceral experience when I found myself examining the picture of the amputated foot.<sup>68</sup> I

leaned forward to examine it closely and suddenly I was hit by a realization of just what it was I was looking at so intently. My head began to swim with nausea and I was in danger of fainting face first on to the print. Hurriedly, I got up and went to the restroom to splash cold water on my face. After a couple of minutes, I pulled myself together and went back to look at the photograph even more closely. I've never had any problem with it since.

In 1982, Sommer's work came to Britain *en masse* when the Serpentine Gallery mounted a one-person exhibition in the middle of Hyde Park—a verdant setting for Sommer's pictures of the desert.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, the leading British photography magazine *Creative Camera* published a pair of essays on Sommer by Dawn Ades and Mark Haworth-Booth. This was an intriguing combination, since Ades had been the major curator of "Dada and Surrealism Reviewed" and Haworth-Booth was Curator of Photography at the Victoria and Albert Museum; later, in 1993, he would buy for the collection the set of prints I am waiting to look at.<sup>70</sup> Their essays demonstrate how an interest in Sommer's work was spreading through the scholarship of both Surrealism and photography in Britain.

I made my own first visit to the American Southwest in 1992. Starting in Santa Fe, we visited a number of major sites—Mesa Verde, Monument Valley, Canon de Chelly, the Grand Canyon—getting as far as Sedona before turning back. But as we drove from extraordinary place to extraordinary place across miles of apparently desolate emptiness, I realized how important the "in-between" space was to a full experience of this landscape and how the desert simultaneously contained both the threat and the beauty embodied in Sommer's pictures.

For a European, the experience of light, color and space in the southwestern desert is quite overwhelming, almost in the nature of an hallucination. I started to read about it, in particular those European writers who had come to this landscape—Reyner Banham and Jean Baudrillard, for example.<sup>71</sup> One other neglected book I came across was *Midnight on the Desert* by J. B. Priestley, an author more associated with traditional English landscapes who went to Arizona in the 1930s and was duly overwhelmed; he stayed at a ranch near Wickenburg, just over the hill from Prescott. He wrote about the landscape in ways that again remind me of Sommer: "In the silence, slowly picking my way, I thought about this Arizona country. The New World! It seemed to me the oldest country I had ever seen, the real antique land, first cousin to the moon. Brown, bony, sapless, like an old man's hand. We called it new because it was not thick with history, not a museum and guidebook place. Man had been here such a little time that his arrival had not yet been acknowledged ... There is no history here because history is too recent."<sup>72</sup>

Back in the V & A Print Room, Sommer's prints have now arrived, trundled

to my desk on a wooden trolley. There are ten photos in a single large blue box (X989B); the eleventh print *Paracelsus*, is kept in another box. They are each mounted without borders on white card, which is held inside a window mount by cellophane photo corners. Here is the portrait of Max Ernst, the squashed jackrabbit, the concertina *Durer Variation* and one of Sommer's "jarred" images made on his own visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>73</sup> But the *Arizona Landscapes* are well represented; there are four of them, each a different variation on the fundamental format. I slowly move back and forth between them, shifting them across the table, and, one after another, each of the pictures pulls me in to look more closely, my eye moving across the textures, overwhelmed by the excessive, hyper-real detail.

These are all contact prints, made directly by placing the 10 x 8 inch negative on to the photographic paper to create a 10 x 8 inch print. There is no space between negative and print in which the detail can dissipate; contact prints seem almost to glow with a jewel-like intensity that is difficult to analyze. Their small scale also means that looking at one is a very private, individual experience; only one person can closely examine a print at any one time.

One of the landscapes in particular fixes my attention (Fig. 1). It's a picture I recognize—it was the upper photo in *VVV* and also the image that Soby had reproduced in his book on Tanguy. It is the most extreme and also the most representative, I think, in its unrelieved flatness and evenness of texture (except for a larger triangular rock in the top right corner which seems almost to be marked with a cross). It's the one I have fixed my attention on, one that—though I don't know it yet—I will return to, and as I close the box and leave the Museum, I try to fix it in my memory.

Two months later, I travel from London to Phoenix to deliver the paper that formed the first part of this essay. But before that, there are a couple of other things to do. One is to visit the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, which holds the Sommer Archive. In this clean, modern, functional cube, I read through letters, notes and interviews, some of which have already been quoted, as well as look at more of his prints. Among them was the *Arizona Landscape* I had focused on in London, this time held in a white frame. How different is it from the print in the *V & A*? Impossible to say, since the two images are 5,000 miles apart and my memory can't bring them together.

Sommer himself remarked, "it's actually very difficult" to make two identical prints from the same negative.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, he made his prints not in batches, but as required, and at different points in his career, seeing each one as a unique expression of the negative and intending each photograph to be seen in and of itself. Later, I learn that there are at least eleven prints of this image in various collections—each

one the same, each one different, not only in itself, but in its contextualization. The same picture is a different picture when seen in London and Tucson.

The most revealing time I spend in Arizona is at the Sommer Foundation in Prescott. I'd gotten in touch with Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox there, who kindly put me up in the guesthouse that was built next to the small cabin where Frederick and Frances Sommer lived. It's very different here from Tucson or Phoenix—higher, cooler—and the cabin sits in amongst tall pine trees. The guesthouse is now home to many of Sommer's artifacts—I notice a few objects that appeared in his photos—and one long wall holds his library of books.

I spent several engrossing hours looking through these, but one book stood out for purely personal reasons. It was a copy of the catalogue for the 1972 exhibition of Caspar David Friedrich's work at the Tate Gallery, London—the same catalogue where I had originally come across Kleist's extraordinary description of the *Monk by the Sea*. It was strangely affirmative to know that Sommer himself had undoubtedly seen those same words in that same publication—albeit some thirty years after he had made the pictures to which I had connected them. There's another extraordinary coincidence here, also, because in that same year—1972—Max Ernst published an illustrated translation of this text on *Monk by the Sea*. According to Werner Spies, Ernst had seen it the previous year and it immediately became “a sort of indirect manifesto.”<sup>75</sup>

The next morning, Jeremy has offered to drive me back to Tempe, taking in the sites of a couple of Sommer's landscapes en route. Moreover, we are taking with us the very 10 x 8 inch camera on which Sommer made the pictures. He loads it on the back of the truck and off we go. The road twists and turns upwards through the tall trees—apparently this used to be the only way out of Prescott. Then the landscape is barer as we drop back down past Yarnell, a landscape of primal large rocks. Below us, the mountains crash into the flat plain around Wickenburg, beyond which more peaks rise in the distance. Halfway down the hill, we pull off on to a viewing platform, walk to the edge and there below us is the goldmine, still a savage gash in the landscape.

At the bottom of the hill, we turn off left along a rough dirt road cutting through the tangled brush. There's a snake squashed in the dust and a cow wanders across in front of us. On the slope to the north, a group of mobile homes gleam white in the sun—“snowbirds” says Jeremy, a community of retirees come south for the winter. The road cuts around the hillside and just at a place where it momentarily parallels a steep wall of rock, we stop. Pointing up to the hillside, Jeremy tells me that this is the site where Sommer made that *Arizona Landscape* which I had scrutinized in London and Tucson.

It's a moment of tremendous excitement, though at first it's difficult to make out. It's in color of course—a mottled pattern of reddish browns and dusty greens—and it's hard to ignore the intense blue of the sky above, cut out of the photo. We are also here at the wrong time of day—mid-morning, whereas the shadows in Sommer's picture indicate he made it in the afternoon. He was also higher up, on the bank behind us rather than on the road itself. Even so, as I look from picture to rockface, I begin to recognize many of the same features and to realize just how precisely this picture was made.

It's easy to assume that Sommer merely had to walk out of his front door to find the *Arizona Landscapes*. In fact, the terrain here is utterly different from that in Prescott. Sommer didn't drive, so he was reliant on Frances to bring him here. She was a social worker who would visit clients in their often-remote homes. We can imagine her on the way to someone in Octave or Stanton, the small settlements this road leads to, dropping Frederick and his camera off here. He would work for a couple of hours, perhaps only making this one shot, before she picked him up on the way back.

Jeremy unpacks the 10 x 8 camera and mounts it on its heavy tripod on the back of the truck. We take it in turns huddling under the dark cloth to see the image of the rockface on the glass screen—upside down, back to front. You're so close that it's hard to see the whole image at one go; then to examine the focus, you have to look through a loupe magnifying glass. (Sommer drilled a small hole in the middle of the ground glass to help with this). The wind whips at the cloth and the slightest crack of light floods across the delicate pattern on the screen. It's a slow, intense process requiring an extraordinary mix of knowledge, experience and experiment. I know enough to know that I could never do it, but to be here on this spot looking through this camera at this hillside at this moment, some sixty-three years after Sommer came here to make his picture, provides an exhilarating moment of connection and comprehension.

Hurriedly, I shoot my own pictures—color on a 35mm camera with a wide-angle lens (Fig. 11). Comparing what I see through my viewfinder and what Sommer included in his image demonstrates the importance of what is left out as well as what is included. The sky is not far above the top of his frame, but its removal is obviously crucial; likewise at the bottom, the vertical wall of rock is just starting to flatten out to the valley floor, though I'm not sure you'd initially see that in the picture itself. Moreover, on either side, the hillside starts to undulate in and out, up and down. Indeed, the rectangle that Sommer extracted is the only part that is quite so vertically flat and even in its texture. Into the frame is packed a density of detail that gives little hint of these surroundings, yet is in itself complex and challenging.

Later, in an email, Jeremy tells me that Sommer annotated some early prints of this image with the words “Rich Hill”—the name of the rise above here. Rich, indeed.<sup>76</sup>

We pack up the 10 x 8 camera and bounce over the arroyos back to the main highway, cut south through Wickenburg and the fake green lawns of Sun City, around Phoenix to Tempe, where Jeremy drops me off at the university. A couple of days later, I deliver my paper and the day after that, I’m flying back to London.<sup>77</sup>



Fig. 11. Ian Walker, *At Rich Hill, Arizona, with Frederick Sommer's camera, showing the terrain depicted in 'Arizona Landscape, 1943,'* photograph © 2008 Ian Walker

1 Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock,” *The Nation*, February 1 1947, reprinted in John O’Brian, ed., *Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose 1945-1949* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 125.

2 Interview with Mary Lou Reed, 1980, transcript in the Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson. It is worth noting that Pollock had been born and raised in the West and his pictorial strategies have also been related to the Western landscape; see Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989/ London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 12-13. For a larger overview, see Emily Ballew Neff, *The Modern West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), Epilogue: “The Abstract West,” 237-73.

3 Quoted by Leland Rice, “Introduction,” *Frederick Sommer at Seventy-Five: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Long Beach: California State University, 1980), 9-10. Sommer

gave a different explanation for his elimination of skies when interviewed by Barbaralee Diamondstein, telling her that it was due to the impossibility of avoiding streaking in his negatives of flat blue skies; see Barbaralee Diamondstein, *Visions and Images: Photographers on Photography* (London: Travelling Light, 1982), 170. Of course, the two explanations – technical and philosophical – are not incompatible.

4 Rice, "Introduction," 9-10.

5 Rice, "Introduction," 9-10.

6 It is too complex to fully annotate here the publications where all these images appear. Briefly, the fullest set (eight in all) can be found in the "Exhibition Checklist" that supplemented the catalogue *Venus, Jupiter and Mars: The Photographs of Frederick Sommer*, exh. cat. (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1980); though they are only reproduced as thumbnail images. The recent major publication, *The Art of Frederick Sommer* (Prescott: Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation / New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) has high quality reproductions of three varied examples on pages 31, 43 and 69; two are reproduced here as Figs. 1 and 2. These are among the images most frequently seen. On the other hand, some pictures (the lower image in *VVV*, for example) have only been published once. The *Arizona Landscape (Large Cactus)* in Neff, *The Modern West*, 263 (in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) has not, I think, been reproduced before. There are probably still examples to be discovered.

7 They are entitled *Colorado River Landscape* and are reproduced in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 61, 83 and 85.

8 *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 73. Bloody Basin is an actual place southeast of Prescott, where Sommer lived. However, in the "Exhibition Checklist" for *Venus, Jupiter and Mars*, no. 14, this image is simply titled *Arizona Landscape*; Sommer's titling could apparently vary in this way.

9 *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 72 and 76.

10 Mark Haworth-Booth, "Frederick Sommer: A Goldmine in Arizona," *Creative Camera*, 204 (December 1981): 331.

11 *VVV*, 4 (Feb 1944): 54-5. In the same issue, "automatic" drawings by Sommer were reproduced, accompanying the article by Benjamin Péret, "La Pensée est Une et Indivisible": 9-13.

12 The images are each about 11 x 8 inches, giving a total size of 16 x 11 inches. The caption is on the previous page: ARIZONA LANDSCAPES / PHOTO: FREDERICK SOMMER.

13 Dawn Ades, "The Elegant and the Macabre - The Surrealism of Frederick Sommer," *Creative Camera*, 204 (December 1981): 336.

14 Postcards and letters in the Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography. In



addition, Ernst apologized for the late appearance of this issue of *VVV*, which was dated February.

15 Sommer subsequently sent Penrose two drawings which are still in the family collection; my thanks to Antony Penrose for this information. A letter from Penrose in Hollywood (September 9 1946), thanking the Sommers and saying "Lee and I enjoyed our short visit with you very much" is in the Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography.

16 Roland Penrose, *Scrapbook 1900-1981* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 140. Oddly, the leading writer on Ernst, Werner Spies, has written of "the drab desolation of Ernst's surroundings" in Arizona, and illustrated that drabness with one of Sommer's *Arizona Landscapes!* (See Spies, "Max Ernst in America: 'Vox Angelica'" in Werner Spies and Sabine Rewald, eds., *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art / New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 70-1.)

17 Margery Mann, "Sommertime," *Camera* 35, 17:2 (1973), reprinted in part in Sheryl Conkelton, *Frederick Sommer: Selected texts and bibliography* (Oxford: Clio Press, 1995), 97. Therein is a demonstration of how this image was compiled, with reproductions of the two separate negatives, on the website of the Sommer Foundation; see <http://www.fredericksommer.org/special-max.html>.

18 Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 144-5.

19 Quoted in Minor White, ed., "Frederick Sommer, Photographs 1939-62," special issue of *Aperture*, 10:4 (1962): unpaginated.

20 Quoted by Gerald Nordland, introduction to *Frederick Sommer: An Exhibition of Photographs* (Philadelphia College of Art, 1968), reprinted in Conkelton, *Frederick Sommer*, 82.

21 Nordland in Conkelton, *Frederick Sommer*, 82.

22 James McQuaid, interview with Frederick Sommer, George Eastman House Oral History Project transcript (December 2-6 1976), quoted by Neff, *The Modern West*, 247.

23 Interview with Michael Torosian (June 28-30 1991), quoted in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 211.

24 Ades, "The Elegant and the Macabre," 336. For an extended analysis of this photograph, see David Company, "Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp: Dust Breeding" in Sophie Howarth, ed., *Singular Images* (London: Tate, 2005), 47-53.

25 Quoted by Nordland in Conkelton, *Frederick Sommer*, 70.

26 Diamondstein, *Visions and Images*, 173.

27 James Thrall Soby, *Yves Tanguy*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 20.

- 28 In the Center for Creative Photography, there is a letter to Sommer from Sage and Tanguy dated July 20, 1951: "Your lovely and unexpected photograph came much later than your note announcing its arrival ... we love the photograph which makes us nostalgic for Arizona." Was this perhaps a print of an *Arizona Landscape*?
- 29 Max Ernst, "Les Mystères de la forêt," *Minotaure*, 5 (February 1934): 6.
- 30 See André Breton, *Mad Love* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 10.
- 31 Mary Ann Caws, notes to Breton, *Mad Love*, 124.
- 32 Benjamin Péret, "La nature dévore le progrès et le dépasse," *Minotaure*, 10 (Winter 1937): 20.
- 33 See Ian Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography* (Manchester University Press, 2007), Chapter Three: "The comic sublime: Eileen Agar at Ploumanac'h," 52-72. A variant version of this text was previously published in *Tate Papers* (Autumn 2005); see [www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/05autumn/walker.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/05autumn/walker.htm).
- 34 Only in one image, made in 1940 and later titled *Champagne Rock*, does Sommer come close to Agar's fascination with the metamorphic forms of nature, but even this image is more awkward, less explicable than Agar's pictures (see *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 56).
- 35 See Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2002), Chapter Six: "Terrain vague," 114-43.
- 36 Reproduced in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 66. It is worth here also recalling the concept of the "no-environment" developed by Willem de Kooning in the early 1950s, but this is again referring to a specifically urban experience. For a discussion, see Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: Brazillier, 1959).
- 37 "Voice from the Wilderness," *Minicam Photography*, 8:4 (January 1945): 30-1, reprinted in Conkelton, *Frederick Sommer*, 33.
- 38 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Photography's Exquisite Corpse," in Terry Ann R. Neff, ed., *In the Mind's Eye*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), 54.
- 39 Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti" in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, eds., *L'Amour fou*, exh. cat. (Washington: Corcoran Gallery / New York: Abbeville, 1985), 91.
- 40 *Aperture*, 10:4 (1962), quoted in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 148.
- 41 The complexity of Weston's work in the late thirties is well described by Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., "The Guggenheim Years," in Gilles Mora, ed., *Edward Weston: Forms of Passion, Passion of Form* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 228-237.
- 42 Letter from Edward Weston to Frederick Sommer, November 19 1938, in

Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography.

43 Jain Kelly, "Frederick Sommer," *Art in America*, Jan.-Feb. 1973: 92.

44 Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the present*, revised and enlarged edition (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982). Sommer is referenced on pages 283 and 288, with the photograph of Max Ernst reproduced on page 286.

45 Letter from Nancy Newhall to Frederick Sommer, August 2 1944, in Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography. Nancy was standing in for Beaumont Newhall, then in the armed forces. (Sommer's work had entered the collection of MoMA in 1941, when *Petrified Forest National Monmument, Arizona*, was bought for the exhibition *Images of Freedom*. More substantially, in 1949 Newhall's successor Edward Steichen bought 10 prints for \$10 each.)

46 The spread in *Aperture*, 4:3 (1956): 103-17, plus the cover image, was Sommer's first appearance in the magazine. A picture by Sommer was again featured on the cover of issue no. 8:2 (1960), together with a second image on page 106. Jonathan Williams' essay "The Eyes of Three Phantasts" in *Aperture*, 9:3 (1961): 106-13, featured Sommer alongside Clarence John Laughlin and Wynn Bullock; it was the first time that the amputated foot was reproduced. *Aperture* 10:4 (1962) was a monograph devoted to Sommer's work; this was laid out by Sommer himself and he used some intriguing juxtapositions. On one double page, he placed two *Arizona Landscapes* one above the other as they had been in *VVV*, suggesting at the least that he approved of that layout and possibly even that it had been his idea in the first place.

47 See Note 6.

48 Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, 1970).

49 Joel Snyder, *American Frontiers: The Photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan, 1867-1874* (Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1981), 49.

50 This name was coined by William Jenkins for the exhibition *New Topographics*, at the International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House, Rochester, 1975.

51 Jonathan Green, *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), 170.

52 Lewis Baltz, *San Quentin Point* (Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1986), unpaginated.

53 The picture was reproduced in Mark Klett, *Revealing Territory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), Plate 4.

54 Richard Misrach, "The Pit" in *Violent Legacies* (New York: Aperture / Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1992), 39-59.

55 My thanks to the anonymous reader of this essay in asking for this issue to be addressed more fully and for making several important suggestions as to how that might be undertaken. And to Jeremy Cox and Naomi Lyons of the Sommer Foundation, who responded to these questions through their knowledge of Sommer's own intentions.

56 Statement on the title page of the first issue of *VVV* (June 1942), written by André Breton. It is quoted in full in Dawn Ades, ed., *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 376.

57 Haworth-Booth, "Frederick Sommer: A Goldmine in Arizona": 329.

58 Georges Bataille, "Abattoir," *Documents*, 1:6 (November 1929): 328-30. For an analysis, see Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 126-30.

59 Diamondstein, *Visions and Images*, 173.

60 Quoted by Rice, *Frederick Sommer at Seventy-Five*, 9.

61 Talk at Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, 1973, transcription in Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography.

62 There is a parallel that might be drawn here with the relationship in the European avant-garde between the apparent opposites of Surrealism and Neue Sachlichkeit. For one example, see Ian Walker, "Blossfeldt and Surrealism," *Photoresearcher*, 11 (April 2008): 27-37.

63 Radio interview with Studs Terkel on WFMT Chicago, March 13 1963 (transcript in the Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography).

64 Quoted by Nordland in Conkelton, *Frederick Sommer*, 69.

65 Originally published in the *Berliner Abendblätter*, 1810; this translation from William Vaughan, *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1972), 30.

66 Ades, ed., *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, 380.

67 Ades, ed., *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, 401. The three images are respectively titled *Eight Young Roosters* (catalogue number 15.48), *Arizona Landscape* (15.49) and *Rocks and Cacti* (15.50). However, this *Arizona Landscape*, reproduced with the catalogue entries, is the image also titled *Bloody Basin* (see note 8).

68 GEH collection, no. 28438. I'm not sure if this was the first time I'd seen the picture; on the same trip, I bought a copy of *Photographic Surrealism* by Nancy Hall-Duncan, exh. cat. (Cleveland, Ohio: The New Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1979), where the amputated foot is reproduced on page 51. I don't know if I saw that reproduction before I saw the print, but in any case it lacks the physical presence of the print.

69 *Frederick Sommer*, exh. cat. (London: Serpentine Gallery, 17 October - 22 November 1981). In fact, this was the exhibition *Frederick Sommer at Seventy-Five*, originated by the Art Museum of California State University, Long Beach, 1980;

the small Serpentine brochure reproduced Leland Rice's "Introduction" from the original catalogue.

70 The Victoria and Albert Museum owns 11 prints by Sommer, of which ten were bought in 1993. The other one - *Taylor, Arizona, 1945* (reproduced in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 63) - had been bought earlier in 1977; it is a rather more conventional picture in the mode of Weston and Adams.

71 See P. Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), and Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1988).

72 J. B. Priestley, *Midnight on the Desert: A Chapter of Autobiography* (London: Heinemann, 1937), 2-3.

73 "Jarred" was Sommer's own term for the technique. Although dated 1959 (see *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 172), the photograph was in fact made during the Sommers' visit to London in December 1960.

74 Diamondstein, *Visions and Images*, 168.

75 Werner Spies, "Postface" to Heinrich von Kleist, Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, *Caspar David Friedrich: Paysage avec un Capucin*, illustrated and translated by Max Ernst (Zurich: Hans Bollinger, 1972), 33. The text is complex, having originally been a review by Brentano and Arnim written as if it were a dialogue between a number of visitors, into which Kleist inserted additional comments, including the "eyelid" reference. My thanks to Ludger Derenthal, who first mentioned Ernst's translation to me in Tempe, 2006.

76 Place names used as titles operate in Sommer's work as both factual references and suggestive metaphors. I had taken the title of the photograph *Constellation* to be a reference to the diffuse composition of the picture. Looking at the map, though, I realized that it is actually (or also) the name of another settlement further on round from Rich Hill.

77 I must express my thanks to Claudia Mesch and Samantha Kavky, the organizers of the conference "Surrealism and the American West," staged at Arizona State University, October 26-27, 2006, where a shorter version of the first part of this paper was first delivered. To Amy Rule, Britt Salvesen and Marcia Tiede for their help during my visit to the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson. And to Jeremy Cox and Naomi Lyons, co-trustees of the Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation in Prescott, for their warm hospitality and helpfulness.