

## A Country Against the Wall: On the Photography of Edi Hirose

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The domestic consumption of cement increased 10% in a single year. Exports increased by 30%. Annual growth rate reached 9% and inflation stabilized at around 3%. The mining sector grew 23% in a single month (mostly on account of China's demand for copper) and the poverty rate dropped from 54% to 27% in less than a decade. GDP per capita quadrupled in two decades and the country consistently came in second in the World Bank's "ease of doing business" ranking for Latin America. Bloomberg rated it as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and someone called it a Latin Tiger. In a word that may seem a bit outdated at this point, but which effectively captures all the facts: Peru was doing well.

Taken between 2008 and 2016, at the peak of the so-called Peruvian Miracle, Edi Hirose's *Expansion* photographs—like a self-commissioned Farm Security Administration survey—trace the transformations of a national landscape in the throes of development. The country he portrays, however, is not a dignified, resilient nation, like the one Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks set out to capture during the Great Depression, but rather an abandoned land, indifferent to the blind enthusiasm (or the quiet indignation) that runs in step with growth. Where Robert Stryker's 1939 shooting script for FSA photographers listed things like barber shops, fire hydrants, traffic signs, "mothers and babies" and "men looking at livestock",<sup>1</sup> Hirose's list would likely consist of non-items: absent workers, tire marks, blank walls, piles of waste—in short: signs of an aftermath, not a bonanza.

The *Expansion* photographs, then, are not so much evidence of human activity, or statements of "fact", as they are attempts to see the world from a post-human, or non-human, perspective—to see things *geologically*, as it were. The Anthropocene, or the Age of Man, refers to a period in geological time that has been largely determined by the presence of humans, yet the

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<sup>1</sup> Stryker, Robert. "The Small Town: Suggestions for a Documentary Photographic Study of the Small Town in America." Farm Security Administration (October, 1939).

paradox here is that as soon as we acknowledge that human activity has defined an entire geological epoch, “the human” becomes subsumed to a wider set of natural forces and variables—i.e., humans are no different than solar flares or methane leaks, in this sense. Our influence over climate patterns and landscape has thrown us into a world of *effects*, not causes, and Hirose’s photographs try to capture what this ontological shift might look like.

The series, after all, is titled *Expansion*, not *Growth*. Growth implies progress. Expansion simply denotes an increase in size. Something expands not by transforming itself, but by extending its reach, by redefining its limits—essentially, *by adding more of itself to itself*. But what exactly is being expanded? Capital? Statehood? Population? And where does it end? One reading might place Lima at the origin and say—in the spirit of Henri Lefebvre—that Hirose’s photographs portray a society that has finally become completely urbanized, i.e., that the city starts (and ends) at the mine and the quarry. Which is to say that nature no longer exists, and everything—be it through extraction, urbanization, or pure speculation—has become *landscape*.

A more accurate reading, however, might say that *Expansion* represents a shift from a topographical to a topological survey of the Peruvian territory. In other words, the photographs represent a space where *urban* and *rural* are essentially interchangeable and there is nothing intrinsically different between a construction site and an open-pit mine: they are both, in a sense, points of extraction within the same matrix of accumulation. This interpretation is further supported by the formal and material themes that run through Hirose’s photographs: a green tarp used on a building site along the coast is also used to wrap mine tailings at 4,200 meters above sea level; Lima’s crumbling cliffside, hopelessly retained by a weeping veil, is redolent, once again, of a mine dump or a distant quarry; a mound of dirt on a building’s rooftop echoes the desert landscape behind it, and it is this very desert, as Sebastian Salazar Bondy once argued, that occupies the city—not the other way around.<sup>2</sup> Or as Herman Melville wrote, “Lima has taken the white veil and there is a higher horror in this whiteness of her woe. Old as

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<sup>2</sup> Bondy, Sebastián Salazar. “El desierto habita en la ciudad”, in *Guaragua*, Year 8, No. 18: Miradas sobre las ciudades. Asociación Centro de Estudios y Cooperación para American Latina (Summer, 2004), pp. 169-175.

Pizarro, this whiteness keeps her ruins for ever new; admits not the cheerful greenness of complete decay...<sup>3</sup> Hirose's topological approach, like Melville's whiteness, flattens the natural accidents that might otherwise define Peru's extractive landscape, and like this, the whole country becomes a desert, *keeping its ruins forever new*.

Of course, it would be mistaken to call Hirose's photographs affectless or distant. As Alan Sekula points out, "even the most deadpan reporter's career is embroiled in an expressionist structure. From Hine to W. Eugene Smith stretches a continuous tradition of expressionism in the realm of "fact"<sup>4</sup>. In Hirose's case, we might say that an expressionist structure might be found in his use of flatness, the filling of the photographic frame, the size of his prints, and his use of the horizon line. The topological flattening mentioned above finds its concomitant in the vertical compression or foreshortening of the landscape being represented: everything becomes foreground. The photographs themselves become walls, echoing what Rosalind Krauss once wrote about landscape paintings after 1860—namely, that they "expanded to become the absolute size of the wall", and that wall and landscape effectively became synonymous<sup>5</sup>—a point that is further emphasized in Hirose's work by a kind of *horror vacui*, where landscape grows inexorably against the picture frame (adding yet another meaning to "expansion"), and only the occasional sliver of clear sky manages to peak through. Furthermore, the compositional horizon does not always correspond to the optical horizon we might experience as embodied observers, but it is close enough to become a referent of its own absence or erasure. Fake horizon lines are drawn by infrastructure and building materials. The view is not so much distant as it is oppressive and abstract.

Ultimately, what these photographs reveal is a reality so implacably self-referential, so bleak and skeletal, that it appears to happen *behind* itself. Lima's buildings become diagrams of themselves. A cement wall becomes a vertical desert plane. We might even say that Hirose's work posits a return to a kind of photographic hyperrealism; not in terms of its detail or resolution, but in its capacity for self-similarity and bare repetition. The question of

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<sup>3</sup> Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick, or The Whale*. Charles Scribner's Sons (1902), p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> Sekula, Alan. *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973 -1983*. The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1984), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in Richard Bolton's *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. The MIT Press: Reprint edition (February 25, 1992), p. 288.

truth—that is to say, photography’s stubborn demand for equivalence between reality and representation—is therefore displaced by a kind of negative mysticism, where there can no longer be any *necessary* correspondence between sign and referent. All we are left with, like the Peruvian economy itself, is the *higher horror of our woe*.