TRISH CARNEY

Wave and Gull, 2011
archival photographic print, 24 x 16 in.

courtesy: the artist

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY

Sierra Inspired

Joining Art and Writing in a Landmark Victory for Nature

In 1960, during the presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the Sierra Club published its first large-format book—*This Is the American Earth* by Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall. The book featured the art of thirty-three nature photographers. Adams had gotten to know Newhall, an impressionistic nature writer, in his dealings with her husband, Beaumont Newhall (a photography curator of the New York Museum of Modern Art). They shared a commitment to saving wild places. As an artist Newhall wrote paeonic verse reminiscent of Carl Sandburg or Vachel Lindsay, only her subject matter was Mother Earth. Adams was perhaps the greatest outdoors photographer America had ever produced. The book's goal was to showcase treasured landscapes of wild America. To Adams, nature was the very symbol of God's all-encompassing ageless spirit (what the poet Robinson Jeffers rhapsodized as "the wild God of the world").

The genesis of *This Is the American Earth* was in 1950. Deeply influenced by the poetry of Robert Frost, Newhall published the handsome book *Time in New England* (with accompanying photography by Paul Strand). Newhall's objective was to create a new genre intertwining prose with photography. Adams—who embraced *Time in New England* as the prototype for *This Is the American Earth*—enthusiastically dubbed this hybrid approach "synaesthetic." While the book's photographers leaned heavily on monumentalism—Yosemite Valley (snowy winter) or the Tetons (thunderstorm summer)—many of the black-and-white compositions were subtler. The cover of *This Is the American Earth*, for example, was Adams's quaking aspens in New Mexico, the quiet grove shaking off the shackles of winter. Besides *Time in New England*, Newhall—a demure photography critic who never searched for the spotlight—had curated many photographic exhibits with tender loving care. Always a promoter of American landscape photography, Newhall became Adams's most trusted friend.

Nancy Newhall had a knack, Adams said, for illuminating "profound thoughts" with "explicit and miraculous words and phrases." He deemed her elegiac prose in *This Is the American Earth*—a long-form psalm—as nothing short of biblical-infused prophecy; somehow he didn't think the writing was overwrought. Gleefully he contributed photos of a frozen lake in Sequoia National Park and Stehekin River in the North Cascades to accompany her text. Newhall spoke for Kennedy's New Frontier when she wrote in *This Is the American Earth* that to "plunder the planet's crust" was a sin against God. In order to illuminate the splendors of Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains or the austerity of Nevada's Great Basin, Newhall needed Adamesque landscape photographs that overwhelmed the reader's senses, honorable portraits that celebrated the wilderness enchantment.

Throughout 1954 Newhall collaborated with Adams on collecting the right photos for the *This Is the American Earth* exhibition. Their aim was to save America from environmental degradation. For more than a year Adams and Newhall carefully mounted photographs for the show, with 103 of them chosen for the book, ones that carefully coincided with Newhall's

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poetic save-the-planet balladry. (Adams contributed fifty-four black-and-white photographs, which were joined by images by Edward and Brett Weston, Eliot Porter, Minor White, William Garrett, and Margaret Bourke-White.) The exhibition—which premiered in the summer of 1955 at the LeConte Memorial Lodge (operated by the Sierra Club) at Yosemite National Park—was the signature public event that launched the modern environmental art movement of the Sixties. To Adams the show at the lodge was "possibly the most worthwhile" endeavor of his entire career, a true historical achievement.

The LeConte Memorial Lodge—declared a National Historic Landmark in 1987—had been dedicated at Yosemite in July 1904 with Sierra Club members from the Bay Area in attendance. When the National Park Service was created in 1916—with Sierra Club member Stephen Mather as its first director—LeConte grew in significance. Harriet Monroe—editor of the journal *Poetry*—once wrote verse to celebrate this highly symbolic Sierra Nevada outpost filled with nature books and a huge stone fireplace. The Sierra Club, working in conjunction with the University of California at Berkeley, sponsored a LeConte Memorial Lecture Series, which became the prototype for the National Park Service on-site interpretive programs.

For Adams the LeConte Memorial Lodge held personal significance. For four summers in the 1920s, he served as librarian-custodian of the lodge, and used the lodge as a way station when traipsing around the High Sierra. There was something magical about the alchemy of the *This Is the American Earth* show at LeConte in 1955. Each image had authority. Adams's "Nevada Fall, Yosemite National Park" (which opened the show) was breathtaking in its forceful tonality, a glorious jewel, its roaring white-frothed cascade of water looking like cumulous clouds. To Newhall, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) provided *This Is the American Earth* with its core philosophy of advocating land stewardship and wildlife protection.

The Sierra Club was spearheading the burgeoning Sixties environmental movement. Under the unflinching leadership of David Brower (called by friends "John Muir incarnate"), the Club from 1952 to 1969 was responsible for projecting the nonprofit out of California provincialism toward a national identity. Brower radiated charismatic activism. His firebrand eyes had a laser-like gaze about them that bespoke fanatical commitment to a *Cause*. It was the same look that writer Henry David Thoreau and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas—ardent conservationists—had. Under Brower's tutelage the Sierra Club's membership rose from 2,000 members in 1953 to 77,000 in 1969, shedding California-centric provincialism in favor of a national campaign.

Throughout the 1950s Brower had testified before Congress in full-bore determination to halt the construction of two concrete dams on the Colorado River in Dinosaur National Monument of Utah. Brower commissioned novelist Wallace Stegner, head of the writing program at Stanford University, to write text for *This Is Dinosaur National Monument* in 1955, accompanied by gorgeous color photographs by Philip Hyde. The handsome book was a pictorial hymn to Utah's red rock country. The Sierra Club, in the end, won the Dinosaur National Monument fight. The *New Yorker* writer John McPhee credited the Dinosaur fight as "the birth of the modern conservation movement – the turning point at which conservation became something more than contour plowing."

In 1960 the Conservation Center Library was established in Denver, pulling natural history research into a single archive, with poet Gary Snyder publishing *Myths and Texts* with Totem Press. Brower alerted nature lovers that the tipping point for a new ecology-driven movement had at last arrived. How Brower read the Zeitgeist of America so well was the result of a combination of networking, lobbying, listening, socializing, hubris, uncanny luck, battle scars, idealism, and a golden Rolodex. Only Justice Douglas knew so well how to inspire troops of outdoors enthusiasts to action. Recognizing that religious movements in history always had charismatic high priests to spread the Sunday gospel (Jonathan Edwards, Billy Graham, or Joseph Smith come to mind in U.S. history) Brower, who could be overbearing, nevertheless willingly played second fiddle to Carson, Adams, Newhall, and Douglas, because to do so meant turning wilderness philosophy into a contagious mainstream movement.

In 1960 when *Newsweek* tried to lump Brother Antoninus of Santa Cruz together with the Beat writers, Antoninus fundamentally rejected the notion. He wrote about birds building nests and waves crashing on rocks. Not drugs, sex, or revolution. What this Catholic priest wanted was the "mystical reality" of God found in each-and-every Ansel Adams photograph. To Brother Antoninus *This Is the American Earth* was a religious document. America, he wrote to the editor of *Newsweek*, was in need of a St. Francis to protect the flora and fauna.

Brower's introduction to *This Is the American Earth* announced that the ecological revolution was stirring. He demanded that unhealthy air and water pollution be regulated out of business. "How much of the magic of this, the American earth, will have been bulldozed and paved into oblivion by the great feats of engineering that seem to come so much more readily to hand than the knack of saving something for what it is?" Brower wrote from a base camp in the Tetons of Wyoming. "Here, where the blue vault arches over the wildest and least limited open space and beauty, even here man's numbers are taming and limiting with greater and greater speed."

Adams and Newhall echoed the old Concord transcendentalists. Newhall's text raised such questions as, "What is the price of exaltation?" or "What is the value of solitude?—of peace, of light, of silence?" There were photos published of a star galaxy, a tern in flight, tidal pools, and Pacific sunsets. A child could have enjoyed flipping through *This Is the American Earth*, it was so reader-friendly. The biblical language spilled forth out of Newhall's poetic text like the waterfalls of Yosemite.

Yet the book was more than a cheerleader's exhortation. Scientists like Rachel Carson insisted in 1960 that it wasn't too late, that with smart public policy marine areas like Point Reyes and Monterey Bay could experience an ecological renewal. Interspersed among the book's text and photographs of the natural world were ghastly images of human poverty, deforestation, and stagnant waterways. Even in California people were clear-cutting old-growth redwood trees—a landscape that novelist Wallace Stegner referred to as the "druidical green peace"—in favor of scorched-earth in-

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dustrialism. Many Californians in seaside towns such as Carmel and Santa Cruz were horrified that their oceanic backyards had become toxic cesspools. Others were alarmed to be alive in the era of U.S.–Soviet mutual assured destruction, horrified that chemicals were being dump-sprayed on agricultural lands. *Ecological balance* became a new catchphrase not just in California but throughout the nation. "Let the rain bring a beauteous tear to your eye," Newhall instructed. "Tenderly now, let all men turn to the earth."

The beautiful book set a new standard for print production. The panoramic text became, in essence, the sermon that Brower would preach for the rest of his life. Newhall, respecting the movement's elders, had incorporated the thinking of George Perkins Marsh, Aldo Leopold, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and Bob Marshall into *This Is the American Earth*. The book, in fact, became like a Hall of Fame program for the entire conservation-cum-environmental movement. While Adams had aimed his photographs toward the general public there was a strong tribal element to the publication, a thank you to nature-loving philosophers from Mary Austin to Robinson Jeffers.

Brower sent all of America's leading biologists gift copies of *This Is the American Earth*. The American Association for the Advancement of Science ended up praising the book fulsomely. Francis Crick, a Nobel Prize–winning discoverer of the structure of DNA, believed *This Is the American Earth* was unprecedented for opening people's eyes to the interconnectedness of nature. Yale University's top zoologist, Edward S. Deevey, summed up Adams's nature photos perfectly when he called the Californian "a master who wields the camera's mindless eye exactly as a painter does his brush."

It wasn't until the 1970s that *This Is the American Earth* became recognized as the primary catalyst for jumpstarting a new way of thinking about humans' industrial imprint on the planet. The book served as the advance agent for the Environmental Protection Agency (formed in 1970), which was responsible for administrating the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the Toxic Substances Control Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the superfund program, and the registration of pesticides under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act, along with administering many other acts. All of this pent-up desire to do something about the environment was out there, and *This Is the American Earth* encouraged a generation to do more to save wild and scenic places.

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Owls, 2012
archival photographic print, 24 x 16 in.

courtesy: DiRosa Art Preserve