

By Robert Girardin,
musician, filmmaker and writer

Lewis Baltz was an American photographer originally from Orange County, California who spent most of his adult life in Paris, where he died in 2014. He was part of the “New Topographics” school of photographers, people who portrayed the privatized, late 20th-century American landscape in stark, formalist terms. As a former teenage resident of Orange County and a staunch ideological dissident of its core values, Baltz’ work immediately appealed to me when I found it. But what I find special about this photo is not only its formalist elegance but what it conveys to me, metaphorically, about being a part of this particular era and place in America. The raw earth, framed and centred in this photo of an almost-completed construction site, is highlighted, as if in a vitrine. Like lava, escaping through a fissure, this elemental asset, without which the entire California fantasy would be irrelevant, asserts its presence among the unyielding banalities which that same California fantasy so heavily relied on for its manifestation. It reminds me that underneath all of our sometimes marvellous, sometimes horrific inventions lies an element which both frames and transcends humanity’s ambitions. Knowing that beneath our cities lies a material which has seen all my dramas played out hundreds of times before me, and will bear witness to future dramas I can not even imagine, centres my thoughts and assists me in revelling in the present moment, the only moment the ground has ever known.



The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California, 1974
Photograph by Lewis Baltz