UTOPIAS
BY RICHARD NOBLE
THE MIT PRESS/2009
239 PP./$24.95 (SB)

Utopias is a collection of documents spanning history and its various incarnations of the “utopian” in contemporary art. Author Richard Noble is a scholar of contemporary art and critical theory, and lecturer of Fine Arts at Goldsmiths College in London, making him a fine choice to edit this volume of MIT Press’s “Documents of Contemporary Art” series.

Some might say that utopian thought is implicit in all works of art. The relation of art and reality is a subjective one. At times, because of power/knowledge systems, this relationship can also be political. This collection makes the point that the majority of contemporary art in any medium posits a “better” reality than the existing one, and this position is refined by the present state of things—the way power relations engage and manipulate the world in which we live.

“Utopia,” in a sense, is part of a dichotomy. The world and the way one has been taught to perceive it is the One; our senses become the subject of the system of knowledge set in place by the present power relations. Utopia is the Other: a fabricated reality made to fit within one’s own sense of morality and ethics.

In Noble’s collection, documents range from the early sixteenth century to present day. Throughout time, the utopian ideal has necessarily shifted. Noble shows, with efficacious distinction, the innumerable reactions or definitions of this ideal.

The book is set in five sections: “The Utopian Imaginary,” “Utopian Avant-Gardes,” “Therapeutic Utopias,” “Critical Utopias,” and “Utopia and its (Im)Possibilities.” Each section examines how the utopian engages with the art of its period and the present “reality” differently. The essays address real and fictional models of utopia from the Communist explorations of Marx and Engels to the “Newspeak” of George Orwell’s 1984; from physical revolution to the intellectual pining and weaponless war of Michel Foucault.

Noble’s Utopias offers an objective way to view art and politics. From a nation’s notion of “newness” to the inventions imbied by those in power, there are countless aesthetic strategies in which art confronts the political; a myriad of opinions regarding reality and what utopia would be. It is an intangible tool that “holds up a critical mirror to the world; a glass through which the darkness of the future illuminates the present” (19).

WEST AND WEST: REIMAGINING THE GREAT PLAINS
BY JOE DEAL
CENTER FOR AMERICAN PLACES/2009/112 PP./$60.00 (HB)

Even as the “New Topographies” exhibition that made his name in 1975 is being reprised (at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through January 3, 2010), Joe Deal has released a new book, which is, quite literally, sublime. If Deal’s aesthetic showed what happened when minimalism and commercial culture collided to revise the idealizing tradition of western landscape photography, his new book, West and West: Reimagining the Great Plains, shows this most invisible part of the American West in its full minimalist glory, reminding readers that the land survives our ideas for its use.

Deal’s recent square-format, black-and-white images rehabit the grid of the government surveys that laid out this arid region for settlement (a questionable idea, as time would tell) and grazing. A Kansas native, Deal writes with intelligence and insight about this depopulated, lunar landscape, evolving from the cool detachment of his youthful work:

If the square, as employed in the surveys of public lands, could function like a telescope, framing smaller and smaller sections of the plains down to a transect, it can also be used as a window, equilaterally divided by the horizon, that begins with a finite section of the earth and sky and restores them in the imagination to the vastness that now exists as an idea: the landscape that is contained within the perfect symmetry of the square implies infinity. (14–15)

Deal recently retired from teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design, and RISD’s Museum of Art will be showing this new work—with an additional series not included in the book, “Karst and Pseudokarst”—through January 3, 2010.

STEPHEN LONGMIRE is a photographer and writer living in the Adirondacks of upstate New York. He is the author of Keeping Time in Sag Harbor (2007), a photo-text. His next book, Life and Death on the Prairie, a photographic portrait of a unique Iowa prairie graveyard, will be out in the fall of 2010.