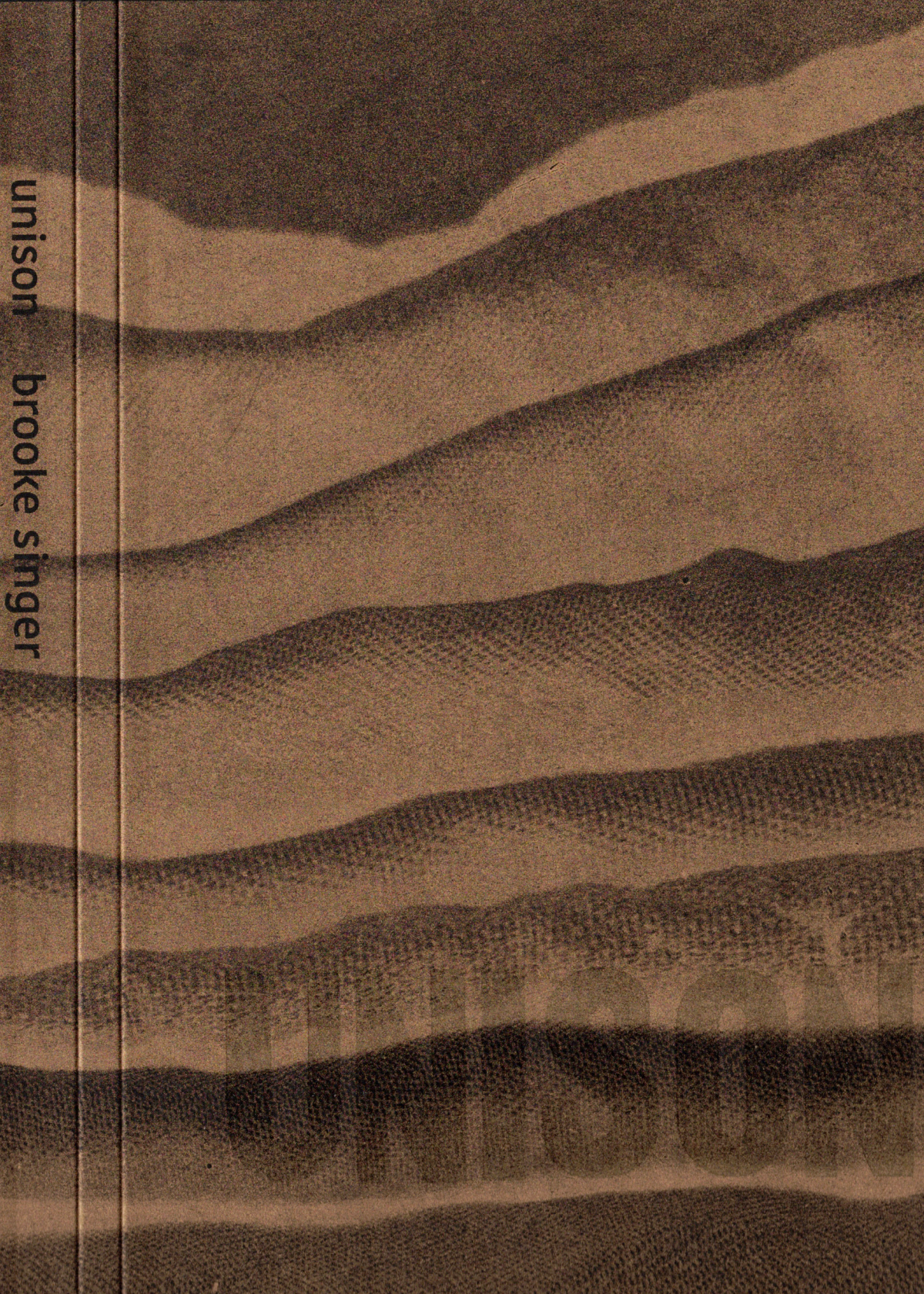


unison brooke singer



I left a stressful job and was newly unemployed in the summer of 2009 as the economy was still reeling from the subprime mortgage crisis. My girlfriend at the time, who is now my wife, was also unemployed and starting grad school in the fall. She is more adventurous than I am, so it took her weeks to convince me to rent our room in Brooklyn, borrow her brother's old Camry with the faux wood interior, and drive and camp around the country for two months.

We packed the car and hit the road. Our first stop was Liberty, New York, a small town in the Catskill Mountains where we had some friends. We didn't have a clue where we would head after that. Except for one flight to California, I had never been west of Pennsylvania. Uncertainty makes me anxious, so I picked up a road map of the US at our first gas exit. It was a large colorful book with a two-page spread for every state in the union. Looking at the map helped me plan, gave me context, and calmed me down.

As we drove into Michigan, then Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska, the thrill and fear of plunging into unfamiliar territory was softened each time I located us on the map. But something in me shifted as the corn and soy fields of the great plains receded behind us and the foothills of the Rockies bubbled up ahead. I was so enthralled by the dramatic changes in landscape, so impressed with the scale of the world around me, that the map began to seem like a nasty prank, flattening mountains and unifying places with wildly disparate characters.

Throughout our drive, I couldn't help but wonder: What unites the United States? There is no distinct territory that one can claim, no climate or vegetation, no single resource cycle or bioregional identity. Only two things other than my map reminded me we were still in America. One was Subway. Each Subway restaurant had the same furniture, same advertisements, and served the same sandwiches in the high desert of New Mexico as in the Douglas-fir forests of Oregon and the grasslands of Montana. The

yellow and green Subway logo cropped up in the most unexpected places. It was indifferent to landscape or the unique cultural character of a place. In all its blunt mediocrity, the logo was fully and uncompromisingly American.

The second reminder that we were still in America was the ol' Stars and Stripes, popping up on bumper stickers, billboards, and, of course, flags. I realized then that the American flag image was different from the Subway logo in some meaningful respects. The latter marked the sites of far flung brick-and-mortar institutions that looked and smelled identical. The American logo, on the other hand, was essentially devoid of explicit connection to any particular territory. Instead, it summoned a heroic mythology of benevolent conquest to unite disparate places under a single regulatory regime. Subway existed only inside the store. America could exist anywhere. The flag united steamy Florida with frigid Minnesota and the Alaskan tundra with subtropical Hawaii. An American flag even claims space on the Moon.

The American flag is remarkable because America is neither a place nor a people. America is a mission. Internally, America considers itself a shining example of tolerant democracy, "the greatest democracy on Earth" and "a nation of immigrants." But where most former imperial powers can no longer justify, on the basis of national character, the conquest of foreign territory, deterritorialization has effectively enabled America to continue these lucrative but violent practices in a post-imperial global context. America has more than 800 military bases in 70 countries worldwide, some large enough to be called "Little Americas." The American flag is therefore an ambivalent symbol, equally representing the state's self-described ideals of popular rule and its reprehensible and thoroughly undemocratic domination of non-citizens.

Deterritorialization may be useful as a logic for expansion and domination. But expansion and domination—alongside being firmly antithetical to America's high-minded ideals of liberty and self-governance—impede efforts to address colossal threats like climate change, ecological collapse, and mass extinction that impact idiosyncratic bioregions in unique ways. Such phenomena are forceful reminders of how we are enmeshed with

our landscapes and therefore how place-based adaptability is crucial to our survival. Indeed, our survival will depend on whether we can make substantial changes to our political constellations to account for these entanglements. Can we adapt to meet the challenges of the moment? How might landscapes—and cultures and customs that emerge from them—be reincorporated into a post-domination national character? How might we understand land claims and our responsibilities to land in a post-expansion future, or one marked by dramatic instability?

These are difficult and necessary questions that demand we rethink the nature of politics in the West. They are also questions provoked by Brooke Singer's brilliant *Site Profile Flags*. Simply put, each artwork is created by sewing together strips of fabric colored with dyes made of plants and minerals endemic to a particular site. The result is a flag that is also a place-based color profile. The visual statement is simple, and yet the conceptual statement has immense implications. Rather than centering a mission-oriented ontology, where the state exists, in a sense, in spite of its earthly constraints, these flags propose that we center landscape in our political formulations. In other words, the flags speculate on the possibility of a new bioregional politics.

If we seriously consider Singer's flags as a proposal for a new order, as I believe we should, then they open doors for some very interesting questions about human settlement and governance in a quickly changing world. They demand that we have nuanced knowledge about our environments. As plant and mineral materials vary even within a single bioregion, they question the uniformity of our experiences of landscapes and the rigidity of our definitions. Susceptible to the effects of weather and sunlight, these flags must regularly be remade, a fascinating and useful metaphor for the challenge of self-governance.

I am deeply gratified that Singer's *Site Profile Flag* will wave high on Unison Arts' grounds as part of *Owning Earth*, an outdoor sculptural exhibition I have the great pleasure of curating. It declares the exhibition's alignment with a politics of mutuality and entanglement and of reverence for landscape. Let's follow Singer's lead and reterritorialize our politics!