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Landscapes: Technology + Art Without Frontiers

At the turn of the 21st century, what do we see in our Landscapes today? How does this connect us to Technology + Art Without Frontiers? This visionary terrain opposes utopias we've seen before in landscape art. Celebrated artist, Edward Burtynsky's atlas of dystopia exposes such fantasies. The "deceptions of destiny is revealed in the bright light of day". In this image, we see a pipeline, directing recovery from the



Edward Burtynsky (1955-). Oil Fields #22 Cold Lake Alberta Canada (2001)

oil sands of Alberta, Canada through a clearing in a forest. Its channel follows the contours of the woods; and only on second glance do we realize the tree line has been re-shaped, altered by the placement of the pipeline. Honouring the extraordinary effort that brings energy to the surface, "nature bends to our will".¹

Landscapes are scenes of large, expansive spaces in nature. Coinciding with the rise of humanism, when man became the measure of all things, landscape art reflected a growing sense of ownership, entitlement with the material world. Nature was no longer something to be feared or revered but studied, understood, tamed, shaped to human will and made to work. The Industrial Revolution in the 18th century brought with it, the first attempts to harvest and harness the planet's resources on a global level.²

Manufactured Landscapes

Consider this image, *Nickel Tailings #34* from Edward Burtynsky's "Mines and Tailings," a series devoted to the environmental aftermath of metal mining and smelting. *Manufactured Landscapes* are sites of the industrial world in which human activity impacts dramatically on the natural scene such as railroads, quarries, mines, recycling plants, oil refineries, ship-breaking yards. Burtynsky reflects on the currency of today's genre:

¹ Roth, Paul. "The Overlook". *Burtynsky: Oil*. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009, p. 168.

² Brown, Andrew. "At the Radical Edge of Life." *Arts & Ecology Now*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014, p. 9.

“I began by photographing the ‘pristine’ landscape, but I felt that I was born a hundred years too late to be searching for the sublime in nature. To me, pursuing this would have been an expression of nostalgia. [...] I decided that what was relevant for our times were pictures that showed how we have changed the landscape in significant ways in the pursuit of progress.”³

“Under a cool, grey sky, against a wintry violet backdrop of distant trees, a brilliant orange river swerves towards us from deep within a brown landscape.”⁴ The startling colours are in actual fact, the intense reds and oranges caused by oxidation of the iron that is left behind in the process of separating nickel and other metals from the ore.⁵ It leaves us to experience the shock of seeing a bright orange stream flowing through a leafless landscape, and to notice our own resistance in processing this information. Our enjoyment really depends on our not thinking too hard about a bright orange river as a chemical and ecological reality.⁶



Edward Burtynsky (1955 -). Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario (1996).

Industrial Landscape (Sublime)

The critic John Bentley Mays associated Burtynsky’s photographs with that of the ‘industrial landscape sublime’, a kind of image reflective of Europe, especially 18th century Britain. Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg’s (1740-1812) masterpiece *View of Coalbrookdale by Night (1801)* is of industrial buildings and their chimneys extending out in an eerie silhouette, against clouds of smoke coloured pink-red by the glare of the ironworks. The monstrous glow, reminiscent of the toxic flowing river in Burtynsky’s “Tailings” series, is both appalling and enthralling.⁷ De Loutherbourg invented the ‘industrial sublime’.

The glow is bright enough to light the path of the horses hauling loads through the night, and to see labourers beside the functionally-designed furnaces. A full moon is immaterial in the round-the clock glare of a new steam-driven industry. The principal historian of the genre, Francis Klingender, has written:

³ Torosian, Michael. “The Essential Element: An Interview with Edward Burtynsky.” *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press, 2003, p. 47.

⁴ Burtynsky, Edward. Urban Mines: Tailings. <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/tailings>. Retrieved 15 May 2019.

⁵ Pauli, Lori. “Seeing the Big Picture.” *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press, 2003, p. 21.

⁶ Baker, Kenneth. “Form versus Portent: Edward Burtynsky’s Endangered Landscapes.” *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press, 2003, p. 40.

⁷ Haworth-Booth, Mark. “Edward Burtynsky: Traditions and Affinities.” *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press, 2003, p. 34-35.

“Industrial subjects were illustrated in increasing numbers during the second half of the 18th century. Cool pits on remote heaths, cavernous quarries in the mountains, mills on the banks of streams and, above all, the iron-works in their smoking lime-kilns, blazing furnaces and noisy forges, appealed to the seekers of the picturesque as perfect examples of the sublime.”⁸

By the end of the 18th century, the steam engine was invented originally for limited industrial use and became a universal motor destined to transform the whole economy.⁹

Central to the arts and literature movement, Romanticism’s emergence in the late 18th century was both a reaction to science, industry and more generally modernity. It was the freedom of the artist to document his own subjective experience within the field of tension of man, world and cosmos felt as provocation.¹⁰ The provocation was the Industrial Revolution and the new light, literal and metaphorical it casts on the landscape.



Philippe J. de Loutherbourg (1740-1812). *View of Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801)

Aesthetic Sublime

Casper David Friedrich (1744-1840) embodied Romanticism as he displayed subjectivity, spirituality and the love of nature. He chose to paint this landscape, *Wanderer above the Sea of Mist* (1818), vertically framed as a portrait instead of the much seen horizontal orientation.¹¹ Friedrich’s pursuit of an ideal dimension within nature, which becomes an unattainable place for man who is reduced to a minuscule, insignificant speck along the spectrum of life.¹²

An aesthetic of the sublime codified by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756) reaches back to Longinus, whose Greek treatise *On the Sublime*, dates from the 1st century A.D. Longinus makes a crucial distinction between the sublime and beautiful. Sheer vastness produces intense emotions, such as awe and terror. The sublime is of such beauty as to

⁸ Haworth-Booth, Mark. *Ibid*, p. 34-35.

⁹ Klingender, Francis D. *Art and the Industrial Revolution*. edited and revised by Arthur Elton, Chatham: Winifred Klingender and Evelyn, Adams & Mackay Ltd. 1968, p. 14.

¹⁰ Rauch, Alexander. “Neoclassicism and the Romantic Movement: Painting Europe between Two Revolutions 1789-1848.” *Neoclassicism and Romanticism: Architecture Sculpture Painting Drawing 1750-1848*. Edited by Rolf Toman. China: Konemann, 2006, p. 435.

¹¹ Casper David Friedrich. https://www.artble.com/artists/caspar_david_friedrich/paintings/wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog#story_theme. Retrieved 13 May 2019.

¹² Russo, Raffaella. *Friedrich: German master of the Romantic landscape - his life in paintings*. London: Dorling Kindersley, 1999, p. 86.

inspire great admiration, awe or terror. Burke's belief that the sublime and beautiful were perceived emotionally, not intellectually, was internationally influential in the latter half of the 18th century. This is his formulation of the sublime:

“Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger; that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”¹³

There is a new awareness of size and the power of the forces of the world, an awareness which invests the word *Nature* with a completely new meaning.¹⁴ When confronted by the sublime in the natural world - a raging flood, a hurricane, a precipitous cliff - man is overcome by an ecstasy of terror; it awakens the limits of his own domination. It evokes an anxiety in the face of nature, and an exhilarating, fraught recognition of its limitless power over mankind.¹⁵ Friedrich's view of nature is realistic, the reality of phenomena.¹⁶



C. D. Friedrich (1774-1840). *Wanderer Above the Sea of Mist* (1818)

Aesthetic Impact

Imagery is regularly employed to give visual form to a range of phenomena: melting ice caps; the effects of rising water levels on cities; areas of deforestation. The view from above is one predominant method for relaying these changes. An aesthetic impact of the aerial view has proven a useful tool, particularly with respect to the environmental movement.

Many scholars have pointed out how our experience of humanity's impact is predominantly visual and sensory. Nancy Newhall who marked the advent of Lakewood, California, which William A. Garnett documented the community's construction process between 1950 and 1954, as “the hell we are creating here on earth.” In 1952, E. A. Gutkind published *Our World from the Air* an international collection of aerial views, chiefly of the built environment. Lewis Mumford provided the book's introduction, declaring a dismal trajectory:

¹³ Haworth-Booth, Mark (2003). *Ibid*, p. 34.

¹⁴ Berger, John. “The Dilemma of the Romantics.” *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*, edited with an introduction by Tom Overton, Brooklyn: Verso., 2018, p. 107.

¹⁵ Roth, Paul. *Ibid*, p. 169.

¹⁶ Russo, Raffaella. *Ibid*, p. 86.

“The earth as we know it holds both a promise of heaven and a threat of hell. If we are heedless of our environment and of human needs, the processes now at work will doom our whole planet to destruction – slow destruction through the removal of the forest cover, the erosion of the soil, the lowering of the water table, the over-exploitation of the land [...]”¹⁷

The impulse to try and see ourselves in the world, apart from ourselves - a paradox in itself - is chiefly evident in the history of mapping. Long before the possibilities of flight and of photography, humans created flattened, overhead views of their surroundings. With the advent of photography in 1839, photographers regularly documented new bridges, railroads, buildings, monuments, and city skylines – all testaments to human ingenuity as well as to growing colonial and commercial networks.¹⁸



W. A. Garnett (1916-2006). Lakewood Park, February 18, 1952.

This grows out of a long history, at first, of seeking out elevated vantage points and later creating views from the air, from various aircraft, spacecraft, and now also drones.¹⁹ Another modern artist closer to this place envelopes technology and takes a ‘view from above’ to new aesthetic heights.

View From Above

Georgia O’Keeffe wrote of her experience in flight from Albuquerque to New York:

“It is breathtaking as one rises up over the world [...] and looks down at it stretching away and away. [...] rivers – ridges – washes – roads – water holes – wet and dry [...] The world all simplified and beautiful and clear-cut in patterns [...].”²⁰

This observation encouraged O’Keeffe to interpret the shapes and forms she had seen from above and express the remembered event in colours, as seen in *It was Blue and Green* (1960). The work depicts meandering curves of varying widths that do not suggest depth or perspective. Her interest remains with the colours and forms suggested by the aerial view of the landscape. O’Keeffe continued to pursue this vision and created some of her most sublime and abstract works.²¹

¹⁷ Hackett, Sophie. “Near and Far: New Views of Anthropocene.” *Anthropocene: Burtynsky, Baichwal, DePencier*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018, p. 16, 19-20.

¹⁸ Hackett, Sophie. *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Hackett, Sophie. *Ibid*, p. 16.

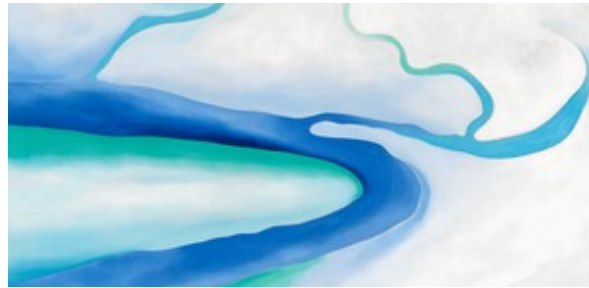
²⁰ *Maria Chabot - Georgia O’Keeffe: Correspondence, 1941-1949*. Edited by Barbara Buhler Lynes and Ann Paden (2003). Georgia O’Keeffe Museum Research Centre. Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press, p. 16.

²¹ Marshall, Richard D. *Georgia O’Keeffe: Nature and Abstraction*. Irish Museum of Modern Art and Vancouver Art Gallery. Milano, Italy: Skira, 2007, p. 18.

A related group of paintings was provoked by O’Keeffe’s first experience of flying above the earth in the late 1950s. Her aerial perspective allowed a new interpretation of the landscape as seen from above, emphasizing the flatness, light and dark, and the meandering shapes of rivers:

“I once spent three and half months flying around the world. I was surprised that there were so many desert areas with large riverbeds running through them ... Later I made paintings from charcoal drawings. The colours used for my paintings had little to do with what I had seen - the colour grew as I painted.”

O’Keeffe’s formal and chromatic innovation, and her synthesis of the lines and shapes she saw in nature convey the very essence of a location. O’Keeffe used an astonishing economy of means, employing radical simplification and a restrained palette to convey the essential curvilinear forms. It shows O’Keeffe’s affinity for framing, cropping and the techniques of modern photography.²² An abstracted, painted landscape of the area’s water systems shows the Colorado River and to the 21st century using digital technology, what do we see?



Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986). *It Was Blue and Green* (1960).

Far and Near

Burtynsky’s aerial photograph of the Colorado River Delta #2, Near San Felipe, Baja, Mexico (2011) shows these once vital wetlands have turned to desert. It features the Colorado river where the estuary has now run dry, leaving behind stunning patterns in the landscape and producing a play of colours and lines similar to abstract images.²³ On Burtynsky’s view on the element of water, “ I wanted to find ways to make a compelling photographs about the human systems employed to redirect and control water. I soon realized that the views from ground level could not show the enormous scale of activity.”²⁴

For the entire American Southwest, the Colorado River has always been a vital artery of life, the muse of poets and songwriters, river guides, shamans, medicine women, eco-warriors, engineers, dam builders, and every farmer from the Grand Valley of Colorado to the Imperial Valley of California. Today, it is but an echo of its former self. Compromised by two dozen dams, quenched dry to grow alfalfa in the

²²Johnston, Hannah. *Tate Introductions: O’Keeffe*. London: Tate Publishing, 2016, p. 23-26.

²³ Burtynsky, Edward. <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/events/2017/03/23/water>. Retrieved 4 June 2019.

²⁴ Burtynsky, Edward. “Artist Statement.” *Burtynsky: Water*. New Orleans Museum of Art. Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2013, p. 9.

desert, all to support but 10 percent of the nation's cattle production, it enters the Gulf of California a river only in name, a shadow of sand, its delta dry and deserted, its flow a toxic trickle seeping into the sea.²⁵

Since the 1950s, the governing elite of the market democracies have cajoled virtually the entire world to adopt a common economic myth of uncommon destructive power. Industrial capitalism, still sweeping the world, requires unconstrained expansion and accumulation. We have become the myth.²⁶



E. Burtynsky (1955-). Colorado River Delta #2, Near San Felipe Baja, MX (2011)

Disfigured Nature

In the mythology of BC modernism, the colonial vision shattered by Emily Carr, who particularly, in her later period, penetrates appearances and for the first time feels the landscape. *Above the Gravel Pit* (1937) shows the expressive dimension in Carr's work – under a swirling blue and purple sky, stumps, and low trees stand on a pillaged landscape with a wall of forest in the distant background – is a response to the landscape in front of her, we can read this image as evidence of the world around her. Carr is rooted in a society founded on the alienation from nature as a precondition for its exploitation.²⁷

While she shows the ravages of logging, the mood is not one of despair, but of renewal and regeneration with the gloriously lit sky acting as a spiritual presence.²⁸ Carr is working from a concept of energy that belongs to the elements of nature itself: the power of the wind, the intensity of the sun, and the thrust of growth, and so on. The forms of nature are 'still' so to speak; it is the atmosphere that vibrates and moves. She writes in her journal,

"I started a new canvas today, a skyscape with roots and gravel pits. I am striving for a wide, open sky with lots of movement, which is taken down into dried greens in the foreground and connected by roots and stumps to the sky. My desire is to have it free and jubilant, not crucified into one spot, static. The colour of the brilliantly lighted sky will contrast with the black, white and tawny earth."²⁹

²⁵ Davis, Wade. "Water Notes." *Burtynsky: Water*. New Orleans Museum of Art. Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2013, p. 22.

²⁶ Rees, William. "Degradation and the Arrow of Time." *Burtynsky: Oil*. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009, p. 195.

²⁷ *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, edited by John O'Brian and Peter White. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, p. 319.

²⁸ Carr, Emily. *Above the Gravel Pit* (1937) Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Retrieved 4 June 2019.

²⁹ Shadbolt, Doris. *The Art of Emily Carr*. North Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre Limited, 1979, p. 122-123.

“There is something bigger than fact: the underlying spirit, all it stands for, the mood the vastness, the wilderness.” Ultimately, Carr’s work is derived from an imaginative and cultural mode that was waning, not advancing that of European 19th century romanticism, which had re-emerged in a Canadian form as she made her art the vehicle of intense personal emotion.³⁰ Carr’s aesthetic view of nature and the environment is similar to Burtynsky, who asserts by showing those places that are normally outside our experience, but very much a part of our everyday lives it can add to our understanding of who we are and what we are doing.³¹



Emily Carr (1871-1945). *Above the Gravel Pit* (1937).

Transfigured Landscapes

Burtynsky is seeking those interesting places and moments to embody a poetic narrative of the transfigured landscape, the industrial supply line and what that means in our life.³² In the diptych, *Carrara Marble Quarries # 24 & 25* (1993), the creamy, flawless marble makes a perfect white ground for the machines, cables and tools of the quarryman’s trade. “It’s as if they’re cutting cake.”³³

The quarry series began by looking at remains after man is finished with something and walks away, leaving to nature the job of slowly pulling the abandoned object back into the ground. Burtynsky found himself thinking about our marks on the land and from a more global perspective, something he has called the “residual thing”.³⁴

“In dimensional quarries, we have to draw the substance out in a certain pattern, with a certain order. The rock face is imprinted with that order, our methodologies, our desire, our need. There are many things that the rock face can tell us about ourselves. Often my approach, the compression of space through light and optics, yields an ambiguity of scale. Because people are always trying to put a human perspective into these images, and our presence is dwarfed by the spaces we’ve created. It’s an interesting metaphor for how technology seems larger than life, larger than our own lives.”³⁵

³⁰ Shadbolt, Doris. *Ibid*, p. 124.

³¹ Burtynsky, Edward. “Artist Statement.” *Quarry Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007, p.9.

³² Burtynsky, Edward. *Ibid*, p.9.

³³ Burtynsky, Edward. <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/quarries>. Retrieved 2 June 2019.

³⁴ Mitchell, Michael. “More Urgent than Beauty.” *Quarry Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007, p. 15.

³⁵ Burtynsky, Edward. *Ibid*, Steidl, p.9.

Inverting the space, this architecture shows the profound centuries of quarrying - who it employs, what the materials are used for. Aesthetics and conscience collide in photography as nowhere else in contemporary art.³⁶



E. Burtynsky (1955 -). Carrara Marble Quarries #24 & #25 (1993).

Technology + Art

In digital technology, nature is captured in contemporary works, which documents the irreversible mark of human activity to reveal the scale, and gravity of the impact on the planet. At an unprecedented moment in planetary history, capitalism is not simply an economic system of markets and production and a social system of class and culture, but as a way of organizing nature.³⁷ The camera bears witness to realities in which technology has inadvertently created sublime landscapes.³⁸ Our revulsion or amazement is tied to the 'art of a world we see'.³⁹ The arts has a crucial place to broaden, deepen an awareness of nature and the imperative to realize a new environmental reality.

Conclusion

This modern form of the sublime is more complex than mere technophobia. It acknowledges our dependence on automation, its betterments, and pleasures; our astonishment at its extremes; and finally our waxing terror at its consequences. We see the ordering force of man, and the chilling, corrosive, penultimate threat that lies at the heart of pure rationalism.⁴⁰ Despite years of growing environmental concerns, we still view the natural world essentially as a commodity, a raw resource to be consumed at our whims.⁴¹

Sustainability is a discourse that articulates an anxiety about whether we, humans, can sustain ourselves as the project of modernity continues its way to find practical solutions by which we might sustain human being. In works of art, there remains the possibility of greater awareness, a chance for us to deploy

³⁶ Baker, Kenneth, *Ibid*, p. 40.

³⁷ Moore, Jason W. "The Road to Ruin: Making Sense of the Anthropocene." *IPPR Progressive Review*, vol. 24(3), 2017, p. 176.

³⁸ Pauli, Lori. *Ibid*, p. 11.

³⁹ Baker, Kenneth. *Ibid*, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Roth, Paul. *Ibid*, p. 169.

⁴¹ Davis, Wade. *Ibid*, p. 25.

human ingenuity not only for destructive, extractive, narrowly self-interested purposes, but to shift what the landscape can mean to us. As philosopher Tristan Garcia has argued, the primary impulse to try and to locate ourselves from above is essentially one of hope, an existential impulse to attempt to understand ourselves and, ultimately, to take responsibility.⁴²

⁴²Hacket, Sophie. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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