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Digging deeper: On horizontal and vertical landscapes

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Cultural theorist Raymond Williams, in his now canonical text *Ideas around Nature*, makes the following remark: ‘A considerable part of what we call the natural landscape ... is the product of human design and human labour, and in admiring it as natural it matters very much whether we suppress the fact of labour or acknowledge it.’[1] In the face of extensive ecological harm and the changing conditions of our environment, landscape is a category that has been undergoing radical re-evaluation. This is due in large part to the fact that, at least in pictorial terms, ‘landscape’ has come to stand for our most vivid ideas around another tricky term: ‘Nature’. The term landscape comes from the aesthetic tradition of seventeenth century Dutch painting, in which our eyes have been trained for a long time. In this tradition, landscape has been tied to the idea of an individual subject standing at a particular point on the ground, projecting its vision onto the horizon. Idealised visions of landscapes associated with the genre of natural landscape painting have shown a discernible bias towards their visual aspects, while precisely concealing ‘the fact of human labour’ pointed out by Williams. Today, we can discern the work of several critically engaged artists that attempt to go beyond the optical qualities of landscapes – a shift described by art historians as a move from *landscape* to *land use*. [2]

An extensive group exhibition around contemporary representations of and experimentations with landscape, *Remembering Landscapes* (2018) at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Siegen inscribes itself within this long-standing and labyrinthine tradition. The ambitious exhibition is a group show that managed to successfully navigate the predicaments surrounding the term in question. The host institution houses an impressive catalogue of

European painting from the second half of the twentieth century (the Lambrrecht-Schadeberg collection), next to which it regularly organises contemporary art exhibitions.[3] A collaboration between multiple institutions – the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade, and Saint-Lukas Gallery, Brussels – it was preceded by several public events (art school workshops and a conference).[4] Remembering Landscape, as the title suggests, is both a farewell to and a critical re-examination of the term. For the most part, the display included recent audiovisual productions by 33 international artists or collectives, spanning a period of 80 years, juxtaposed to poems on landscape the visitor could consult in-between the works. The exhibition privileged post-millennium works that cover a wide array of topics. The curators, Eva Schmidt, director of the museum, and Kai Vöckler, professor at the College of Design (HfG) Offenbach, made the term landscape their departure point to move towards several contact zones: between the human and the geological; between capitalism and natural resources; and between infrastructural violence and environmental violence. These strands were not explicitly displayed within the space but candidly emerged from the works.

In the exhibition, the visitor is greeted by a large-format photograph by French photographer Luc Delahaye, *A Mass Grave Near Snagovo, Bosnia* (2006). This work depicted a countryside landscape with a crew of archaeologists and forensic experts from the International Commission on Missing Persons working on a mass grave in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the raised perspective of Delahaye's image may be panoramic, the viewpoint offered to the spectator was not a horizontal vista. Rather, the photograph looked across a terrain, while simultaneously cutting through it. The image created an impression of three-dimensional volume (accentuated by its colossal format) and layered with political and historical strata. Most importantly, the raised position of the camera allowed for a disclosure of these historical layers. Instead of remaining in the position of a subject merely gazing *at* the depicted landscape, the beholder is drawn *into* it. This shift of position – from mere onlooker to being enmeshed in the landscape – is a feature present in several of the works, becoming the most compelling aspect of Remembering Landscape.

In Aglaia Konrad's 16mm film *Il Cretto* (2018) the viewer becomes entangled in the landscape of *Cretto di Burri*, a site-specific artwork by the Italian artist Alberto Burri. In 1968 the island of Sicily was struck by a major earthquake and Burri's intervention consisted of pouring concrete over the ruins

of a Sicilian village. Shown in a split screen, the initial horizontal distant take of an almost pastoral mountain view successively zooms in, immersed within the strange, labyrinthine construction. At regular intervals, the double-split screen is further cracked, giving place to a four-image construction within the single screen. Usually, a split screen serves the purpose of bringing, within the same frame, two distinct spaces, which would make one argue that it conveys a sense of fracture: a frame, next to a frame, within a frame (the screen). The double-composition of the screen in Konrad's film however creates a different effect as the 'frame next to a frame' portrays a different take of the *same* space, and, all the more, the takes appear almost identical. The white concrete surfaces, at times taking over the whole screen, are multiplied, thus overwhelming and enveloping the spectator in a one-dimensional landscape. The position of the spectator in front of the landscapes of the exhibition becomes unstable and ambiguous.

Toxic landscapes on film

In their investigation of different viewpoints of landscapes, several participating artists inevitably addressed environmental matters. *Silbersee* (2015), a photo-essay film by Swiss artist Alexandra Navratil, also comments on the position of the beholder, albeit employing different means. Black-and-white images of a wastewater deposit for surrounding factories – that remains highly toxic to this day – tie-in with poetic text. The film shows a grizzled landscape of industrial ruins. Read by a dim voice, we hear the words: 'My breath calcifies / I desiccate / I ossify / My past atomizes.' Somehow it is as if the image gains agency and the subject who speaks can only be the lake itself and not a human being. However, the symbolic agency of 'the lake that speaks' is perhaps not so symbolic after all. In fact, scholars are increasingly pointing to landscape not as a passive background but as a milieu of mutual land-human interaction in which human and non-human are equal. As Swenson and Scott remind us, 'landscapes can no longer be seen as an entity solely acted upon, but one which also acts, structures, and exerts force by itself'.^[5]

The balance shift towards human / non-human equality plays out in several other exhibited works and created a fleeting impulse to invoke the term Anthropocene – a concept permeating the humanities and social sciences to-

day. The Anthropocene denotes the geological epoch recognising human activity's impact on a geo-scale. The term is not overshoot in the show, even if it does not pervade the curatorial attitude.[6] For instance, for the case of *Silbersee*, the main interest lies in the industrial and technological history of photography, layering the work with material concerns as well. As a matter of fact, the factories that used to dump their debris in the lake were film manufacturers. Among them was the Agfa-ORWO photographic film factory in the former East Germany, which was enjoying a monopoly in film production during the era of the GDR. The work thus considers a double materiality: that of landscape and its deterioration as a result of the production of film stock; and also that of the image itself, which explores the visual and the material as integrated concepts. It brings forward the resonant discussion on the materiality of the image, its irreversible material decay, and its agency. Reading this dual relationship with an ecological edge, Nadia Bozak argues that photographic images, whether still or moving, 'directly and indirectly formulate landscape as both an aesthetic category and a physical reality, both representing and contributing to the decay of the environment'.[7]



Fig. 1: Kristof Vrancken, *Transit, Winterslag*, Genk, 2017. 46x61cm, anthotype Blackberry emulsion on paper, contact print, exposure time: 4 weeks. Collection Emile Van Doren Museum.



Fig. 2: Kristof Vrancken, *Transit*, Waterschei, Genk, 2017. 46x61cm, anothotype Blackberry emulsion on paper, contact print, exposure time: 5 weeks. © Kristof Vrancken.

A similar line of enquiry is pursued in Kristof Vrancken's photographic series *Transit* (2017). *Transit* dealt with post-industrial landscapes, relying on its means of production and materiality to bring out meaning. The Belgian photographer's work pays tribute to the city of Genk in Belgium and its industrial past by including images of polluted wastelands which lie abandoned after the closure of several factories in recent years. *Transit* centres on the well-known genre of the pastoral landscape, unsettling it as the images are wrapped in hues of grey to screen their content. To develop the pictures, Vrancken followed the nineteenth century "anthotype" process, using a mortar obtained from plants he harvested in the same (highly polluted) locations portrayed in the images. Thus, the dusky images point to a tautological relationship, through an unforeseen collaboration between artist, film and (toxic) flowers. The visual content of the picture coincides with its material counterpart. The images bring to the fore the paradox Bozak raises, where the production of an image depicting an idealized vision of a natural landscape marshals technological and logistical means that erode the very same landscape.[8]



Fig. 3: Exhibition view of Susanne Kriemann, *Pechblende (Prologue)*, 2016. © Christian Wickler.

A similar, albeit not unexpected, collaboration between organic matter and photosensitive surface lies at the core of Susanne Kriemann's photographic series *Pechblende (Prologue)* (2016). Employing autoradiography, a technique utilising camera-less exposure, the German artist assembles a photographic archive of landscapes tainted by radioactivity. Autoradiography was used throughout the Cold War for scientific purposes. By using the bodies or organs of animals to measure levels of radioactivity in atomic test locations, non-human bodies were transformed into mere scientific instruments. Other pictures from the series zoom out of organic tissue and depict remote aerial views of former mining sites in what used to be the German Democratic Republic. A flat land surface bears the residues of the nuclear mining industry, turning the landscape into a radioactive tracer. Setting aside their concern with filmic materiality, the common denominator of the projects outlined above is an engagement with what lies *beneath* the landscape, going beyond the immediate visual qualities associated with the genre. This shift towards the underground, as opposed to the aboveground, towards verticality instead of horizontality, is most prominently dealt with in works that address the economies of mining and their effect on humans and the environment.

Let us consider the contribution by Unknown Fields Division, a design research studio which, in its members own words, investigates ‘peripheral landscapes, industrial ecologies and precarious wilderness’.[9] *All Up in My Grill* (2016) is a video piece, accompanied by an installation, concerned with the wicked conditions under which gemstones are extracted in Madagascar. In the video, a human conveyor belt appears vertically, shoveling towards the depths of an open-pit mine. The workers are unearthing one of the most valuable natural treasures, sapphire, which will end up in highly-priced pendants sold in the West by luxury retailers. While the bodies dig rhythmically, sums of money pop up indicating the operating daily costs of the human conveyor belt – the amount is paltry as one might expect. The more the image zooms out, the more the sums increase as we start seeing the ludicrous prices sapphires command once they enter the market. The wider the shot of the landscape, the stronger our grasp of the inhuman and dangerous work that plagues the gemstone industry.

Several of the works in *Remembering Landscape* are clearly in dialogue with the work of Robert Smithson, who was among the first to show great interest in raw matter, mineralogy, and geology. Smithson worked on peripheral, interstitial sites, including quarries, dumping grounds, and liminal places at the edge of cities or in remote locations. In fact, German artist Markus Karstiess’ *What the Earth Sees* directly alludes to Smithson’s renowned *Asphalt Rundown, Rome* (1969). Part of his ‘flow’ series, the work consisted of pouring a bulk of asphalt over a sloppy hill in an abandoned industrial location outside the Italian capital. Karstiess’ installation and film pays homage to Smithson by trying to unearth the remaining chunks of asphalt, which for almost 50 years lay buried in the soil that covered the initial action. The ‘flow’ hints at the sculptural process which oftentimes entails rules of its own, as materials go beyond artistic control, like asphalt running down a hill.

Turning our gaze below landscapes

If we attempt to pinpoint a shared strategy among the artworks described so far, one cannot help but to single out the process of *digging*. Indeed, either as a theme or as a format, digging becomes a prominent feature, taking form through an amateur archeology of the recent past. Karstiess, for instance, screens the film of himself digging, along with a display of amorphous clumps of asphalt shown on pedestals and cased with glass. He mimics the

style of archeological findings in a museum setting. Critic and curator Dieter Roelstraete identified this tendency when he came up with the appealing title *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art*. Admittedly, Roelstraete did not have in mind the tradition of landscape painting, however the field of archeology itself has struggled with definitions of the term: how people engage with the surrounding world and the past embedded in the landscape is central to archaeological research. In *The Way of the Shovel*, the critic explains that, increasingly, contemporary artists refer to their practice in terms of ‘digging’, ‘mining’, and ‘excavating’. Such terms indubitably speak to the artistic concerns of the exhibition, where historical and geological layers are stacked atop each other and attempt to re-articulate ideas around landscape. Within this context, one was not surprised to encounter Paul Virilio’s by now eminent photographic series and accompanying book *Bunker Archeology* toward the end of the show. A type of floating architecture, the concrete blockhouses traversing the French Atlantic coast are reminiscent of archeological findings, eroded and absorbed by the earth’s (or the coast’s) movements. For good measure, bunkers denote underground space *par excellence*.

If archeology is more about digging than showing, then what could be the fate of the primarily visual tradition of European landscape painting? And, one might add, of the sub-genres it has abundantly inspired (from the American Hudson School to more recent genres like eco-tourism or wilderness photography)? Art history has emphasised the visual dimension of landscapes, and of *seeing* more broadly speaking. However, ‘the way of the shovel’ points to a more material, rather than solely visual, approach, and by consequence one that retreats from view; or, at least, to one that is at once visual and material. The notion of haptic visuality could be brought to bear on this strict separation between vision and matter. Inducing a physical engagement through the vision of the image, haptic visuality offers a kind of immersion, finding fault with the centrality of vision without cutting it out completely. Through that angle, the material qualities – both tangible and abstract – of the landscapes one encounters in the exhibition space at times produce a sensory experience while strolling among them.

If Roelstraete’s ‘way of the shovel’ announced an all-increasing preoccupation of recent art with the (material) residues of the human past, and by extension with human history, Remembering Landscape layers this archeological aspect with one that does not only include the human. Just like arche-

ology's shovel is about searching for the human past, geology's shovel is concerned with the non-human past of soil; rocks; stones; fossils; and material entities associated with the inorganic and the inanimate, burdened with connotations of pre-history, stillness, and an environment that is static. All this 'stuff' lies under our feet, and even though we cannot see it, it incessantly supports our extractive economy. I took this shift of the beholder's position evoked earlier as an invitation to reflect upon my own position in front of these images. If, to follow environmental historian William Cronon, wilderness landscapes embody a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural, then the place where we are is the place where landscapes are not.[10] In line with Cronon, *Remembering Landscape* casts doubt on similar assumptions by asking us to look beneath our feet, unsettling the burden of European (horizontal) traditions of landscape.

Taking a step further, recent experimentation in video art with horizontality and verticality often erases the distinction between the two, a move that finds a productive counterpart in the genre of landscape. Comparable winds have blown across multiple disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, signaling a crisis point for the category of landscape itself – at least for a conception that would prioritise the physical separability between a landscape and a subject gazing at it. Architectural historian and architect Alessandra Ponte, for instance, opts for the term *environment* instead of landscape.[11] The horizon, Ponte explains, pertains to a pictorial tradition, to perspectival construction, which may not be able to translate our contemporary environmental moment. In fact, the multi-dimensional landscapes of the exhibition turn into spatially coterminous entities with their subject matter: when they are digging, they are vertical, when they are representing, they are horizontal – only most of the time they do both and therefore challenge the dichotomy. *Remembering Landscape* thus articulates a rich and coherent panorama of such new (metaphorical and literal) directions pointing to a permeable landscape that is not only visual.

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Notes

- [1] Williams 1980, p. 78.
- [2] Scott & Swenson 2015, p. 5.
- [3] As stated on the museum's website, an important conceptual point of departure for the exhibition program was the works of Bernd and Hilla Becher, since Bernd Becher was born and raised in Siegen, and documented industrial aspects of the surrounding landscape. Such a take is certainly the case for the exhibition in question. <https://www.mgk-siegen.de/eng/museum-und-publications/museum/program-und-collection/program-und-collection.html> (accessed 20 March 2019).
- [4] In fact, the smaller version of the exhibition will be reiterated at Sint-Lukasgalerie & De Markten, Brussels, preceded by a symposium in April 2019. For access to the conference program to be held at the Sint-Lukas School of Arts, Brussels, see: <https://www.luca-arts.be/agenda/e/symposium-remembering-landscape/ea9248b8-094f-4d66-af89-342a337de614> (accessed 28 March 2019).
- [5] Bozak, 2012, p. 13.
- [6] A more in-depth theoretical engagement with the term is offered in the extensive, richly illustrated, bilingual catalogue that was published following the exhibition.
- [7] Bozak, 2012, p. 13.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] <http://www.unknownfieldsdivision.com/summer2013madagascar-journeytotreasureisland.html> (accessed 20 January 2018)
- [10] Cronon 1996.
- [11] 'A conversation with Alessandra Ponte', 2 November 2017, available at: <https://yalepaprika.com/articles/a-conversation-with-alessandra-ponte/> (accessed 20 January 2018).