Between Manufacturing and Landscapes: Edward Burtynsky and the Photography of Ecology

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Abstract

The industrial sublime has become the signature trope of Edward Burtynsky’s photographs to such a degree that it makes his images now fairly quick to recognize. This essay begins with a critique of the way the conventions of the sublime frame the photography of nature in favor of awe and anxiety over detail and activism. Burtynsky pushes the environmental image to more complicated ecological stakes by making photographs that question the relation of image to commodity extraction, recycling, and the implication of the mechanics of the photograph in the object it captures. Commodities live complicated lives that pass through matters involving national economies, corporate agendas, labor, environmental stress, and the consumer object—all of which involve aesthetic elements and affect ecological conditions. In such focus on the material and affective life of the commodity, Burtynsky is working only peripherally involves human, which gives his work a post-human feel.

Another post-human choice in Burtynsky’s work involves his increasing use of the aerial shot or the use of a crane or ladder, which aligns the camera with aerial technology from planes to satellites, complex machines that have important and vexed relations to specific environmental conditions. By combining an analysis of manufactured landscapes with manufactured images, this essay considers the problems and positive potentials concerning the role of photography in ecological critique.

Keywords: Edward Burtynsky, photography, ecology, commodity extraction, aerial art

The documentary film on Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, Manufactured Landscapes (2007), begins with an unforgettable eight-minute, single-take shot from a camera tracking across the floor of a factory in Xianam City, China (Baichwal 2007). What we are seeing in director Jennifer Baichwal’s film—which follows Burtynsky to several locations that he is photographing—has been explained by many viewers and the photographer himself in the concise words of the film’s title: these landscapes are human-made feats of engineering of such tremendous proportions that they have taken on the scale of geological forces. Calling on the aesthetic traditions of landscape appreciation, we are bound to see these vast spaces with a sense of sublime awe at such enormous scales, staggering numbers, and breathtaking vistas, combined with terror at the smallness of ourselves, our singularly fragile point of view, and the depersonalizing bluntness of the image’s content.

The sublime consistently serves as a framing device for nearly all of Burtynsky’s photographs, but viewing this perspective certainly built into the images, it begins to limit what we see inasmuch as it channels our expectations into a narrow range of generalized amazement and individualized anxiety. In fact, the industrial sublime has become the signature trope of Burtynsky to such a degree that it makes his photos now fairly quick to recognize. (An exhibition of his work that toured during 2011–12 was titled “The Industrial Sublime”). All of the essays that open his first major book, also titled Manufacturing Landscapes (2003), reference the sublime in his images. When Burtynsky’s national background is breached, there are often allusions to a romantic sense of the Canadian sublime influencing his eye on vast vistas and rugged country. As Baichwal writes, “To me, pursuing this would have just been an expression of narcissism” (Burtynsky 2003: 47).

This essay examines how the potential variety of ways of seeing otherwise than sublime, Burtynsky’s photographs frame contemporary issues of ecology and the role of visual media. Consider for example the different gases aside from awe that Baichwal’s eight-minute tracking...
shot could be standing in for: the Chinese manufacturer or government overseer who would be pacing the floor with stern pride and a sense of nationalist duty; the effectless surveillance camera, which is scanning the workers for laziness or theft; the giddy American businessman who is visiting the floor where he has hired workers at fractions of the cost he would have to pay American workers; the environmental activist who would never be allowed on the shop floor, but who might sneak in to witness with malice the machines and the empire of raw materials that were yanked from the earth to feed the insatiable world demand for commodities; one of the workers herself, treading slowly to her post, not mindless at all but fully attentive of her family depending on her labors, and finally the perspective of the commodity itself, sliding along the conveyor belt waiting patiently for its next plastic part or packaging sheet. At the end of the eight minutes of this entirely interior landscape, what we begin to see is the very impossibility of reconciling all these possible viewers into one narrative only. Yet the machines, women, workers, and camera carry on in a conveyor-belt continuity that defines our present moment. In between manufacturing and landscape, there lies a world of ecological issues. But what does it mean to photograph ecology, which, as Burtynsky makes clear, is not necessarily the same as photographing nature? In her 1970s essays on photography, Susan Sontag coined the idea of an “ecology of images,” turning to the language of environmentalism to call for a “conservation” of the image to counter mass consumption of the world as spectacle and the mass reproduction of pictures that kept turning even iconic images into empty clichés (Sontag 1977: 189). Sontag primarily meant the term “ecology” as a metaphor for the ethics of viewing photographs, rather than photographing ecologies. Sontag had latched on to the sharply escalating ethical cache of the word, due to the quickly spreading global environmental movement, yet Sontag adamantly refused to limit photography to any program including ecology itself. Thus “ecology” for Sontag indicates a care for the long-term effects of exposing persons and things to the demands of the mass reproducible image. Our insatiable desire for more and more photographs bodes poorly for the image as well as the subject of the photograph to sustain its ethical power and to refresh how we see the world. In this case, however, Sontag seems more worried about the liveliness of the photograph than the impenetrable life on earth. In effect, Sontag wants to reestablish the sublimity of the image to protect it from the degrading association with other commodities, a losing battle that indicates how the ecology of images is not about conservation of the visual but its intensification and integration with the nonhuman world.

Photographers and ecologists are now frequent collaborators, but the role of the photograph remains productively ambivalent in blending matters of aesthetics with issues of environmental activism. Here I consider Burtynsky’s formal and ethical choices along with his overall rise to the ranks of stardom in environmentalist circles (despite his own reluctance to identify himself as part of such a group), although his work is often included on environmental studies syllabi and has been highlighted by organizations supporting progressive-minded environmental agendas such as TEO and the Pico Pit). Burtynsky’s work figures in the context of the growing interest in combining ecology and media studies. Looking at the medium of photography as implicated in ecology involves not just drawing from the tradition of natural aesthetics, but also making connections between new media, capitalism, and globalization, all of which bear immensely on the environmental pressures facing the earth. The photography of ecology has an uneven and uneasy relationship to the visual appreciation of nature, which is why I turn to scenes and affects different from the sublime and the beautiful.

While much discussion of natural aesthetics in photography focuses on the conservationist role of the camera in picturing vanishing animals and ecosystems along with documenting environmental disasters, I approach Burtynsky’s work as a visualization of the everyday lives of commodities and our dependencies on them. Burtynsky only rarely photographs the environmental catastrophes that appear on the front page of newspapers; instead he shoots the “slow violence” perpetrated on ecosystems. Rob Nixon’s phrasing to describe gradual and often invisible forms of environmental abuse, including what has come about due to our relentless extraction of the earth’s commodities (Nixon 2011). Raw commodities are not often accorded attention in most accounts of environmental aesthetics since they do not supply much of an emotional attachment to naturalist narratives unless they spill or ignite or pollute a precious patch of land. Furthermore, much naturalist photography, even with an environmentalist edge, is meant to evoke a sublime, untranslatable experience that leads to an unambiguous and continuously reproducible moral imperative. What we won’t see in the mainstream environmental image but must come to terms with in Burtynsky’s photographs is the way an image can draw us into a critical analysis of the frames of our ecological assumptions, the articulations of human subjects in an alternative visual engagement that offers new relations with nonhuman entities, and the contradictions of our reliance on polluting machines from cameras to helicopters to satellites in order to appreciate landscape in the first place. In sum, what kind of ecological work can a photograph do beyond the aesthetic conventions of landscape appreciation or the documentation of vanishing nature?

My analysis centers on three main themes of Burtynsky’s work: (1) the visual and cultural conditions of the corporations and people that form around the extraction and discarding of commodities; (2) the messy material conditions of recycling as compared to the fantasy of seamless reusability and idealized sustainability; and (3) the questions and controversies of ecological activism that are raised by these photographs, which often put the viewer in the position of being overwhelmed rather than in a capacity to effect change. Concerning the agency of the viewer in particular, I discuss at the end of this essay how Burtynsky’s favoring of the aerial shot or the use of a crane or ladder has the double effect of distancing the viewer from the scene while providing a visual window so large that the viewer feels absorbed, indeed thrown back into, the image. Aerial images were first popularized by land and earth artists in the 1960s; Burtynsky favors similar visual perspectives and motifs such as abstract primary forms made out of earth, but his work critiques previous art movements for underplaying the issue of resource extraction and the role of the commodity in earth shaping. Abstraction and immersion at the visual level follow the same path as the raw commodity, as it is extracted from the ground and abstracted into a consumer item that is as much image and affect as it is object, then later thrown back into the world, re-materialized into junk. In such a focus on the material and affective life of the stages of the commodity, Burtynsky’s images include human, machine, and earth which gives his work a post-human feel. These images are also post-human in the way they question scales of individual human agency, as the photographs of landscapes strewn with amassed or discarded resources respond to the agency of large machines much more than humans. A realistic and honest account of the ecology of commodities includes human, machine, and earth as relevant actors in a dialogue, and requires an overlaying of several perspectives that has the effect of making interconnectedness, a major ecological concept, itself something visualized. But interconnectedness does not mean resolution.
The Commodity Image

Burtynsky’s work follows the lives of basic commodities including coal, oil, water, granite, and nickel, and he is noted for concentrating mostly on the initial extraction and the ultimate discarding of these objects, rather than on the various ways they are put to use. Usually we associate the aesthetic life of objects with their appearance in the marketplace, where they have had time to be gussied up to attract passersby (the history of photography has paralleled the story of images in advertising, both becoming prominent in tandem with the rise of the middle class). But as Burtynsky shows, raw commodities already participate in an aesthetic life, one that is tied intimately to their ecological fate. Centuries of repeated earthmoving and commodity extraction have left distinct patterns in the land as well as sculpted distinct cultural forms and perspectives toward nature. Some of the recurring visual tropes that emerge in Burtynsky’s serial work on mining and quarrying include the gap, the gash, the funnel, the pile or negative of a pile, the gouge, and the cubist-like sitting of a face of rock—all shapes of the abyss created by angular cuts or controlled blasting. Extraction is abstraction, which gives new environmental meaning to the idea of abstract art. In Mines #19 (Figure 2), Burtynsky shoots a Westray open-pit coal mine in British Columbia from a vantage point that situates in the top half of the picture a mountain-sized pyramid. The huge staircase terraces of the pyramid are made by mining in drag lines across the landscape. The bottom half of the picture is an inverted pyramid, with the foot of the image showing black swirls in a space waiting to be terraced. The pyramid is a classic icon of power yet in today’s commodity-driven world, so is the inverted pyramid. But this black, sooty negative pyramid exudes its power ominously, and will be abandoned once the value is extracted from it.

From mines to oil pumping, Burtynsky repeats the visual theme of extraction rendered as abstraction, photographing geographical space as sculpted into patterns, parcels, and networks. Paralleling this visual abstraction, the commodity follows a fateful shift from solid to liquid to air: from raw matter to freshly packaged consumer item buoyed by its image, and from thing into value. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels once described the material-transforming process of capitalism in “The Communist Manifesto” with the phrase: “All that is solid melts into air” (Engels and Marx 1978: 476). Marx and Engels had borrowed the metaphor of solids to gases from chemistry (and alchemy), but the transmutation metaphor is not so obvious since at first glance it might seem like air something free and cheap, is the worthless end point in the process rather than something enriched. In Marx and Engels’s phrase, air is the medium of capital’s pure form; the air indicates the inexorable aim of the capitalist to convert material goods into abstract, wet-nigh invisible forms of money that are more easily hoarded and leveraged. Not only are solid commodities rendered into an airy virtuality, an abstract form of equivalence (exchange value), but so too are human relations, traditions, and the landscape itself made liquid and fungible. A solid that becomes air does not mean that all is immaterial; rather, Marx and Engels describe how forms of labor and objects are funneled into a world marketplace that treats the history of each as irrelevant to the cash nexus that
Invisibility sets the terms of exchange value. The air is the new agora, the world marketplace with no fixed abode. Yet another reading of the phrase points to how capitalism requires a continuous revolution of production, an endless churning of invention, reinvention, new industries, new markets, and new products. It is not only yesterday’s products and modes of production that are gone in a whirl, but also the traces of laboring hands and sourcing of materials that seem to vanish into the full-fledged commodity. In all these cases, we are not meant to see air; to trace its physical history, but to breathe it in our daily life of producing and consuming.

A similar process of earth being abstracted into primary forms of capital exists in Buryntsky’s photographs of quarries, where solids are being sculpted out from rock faces, leaving nothing but shaped air. In Rock of Ages #1 (the E.L. Smith Quarry in Barre, Vermont) Figure 3, the mountain of rock is being dismantled block by block. A puff of steam from an engine or a wisp of rock turned into smoke curls up in the top section of the picture, showing the labor involved in the shift of matter into air. The solidity of the wall face contrasts directly with the atmospheric space that occupies much of the volume of the image. The more rocks are rendered geologically, the more they are “virtualized” or abstracted into airy capital. The photograph does not capture rocks literally melting but poses air and solid against each other in order to visualize the commodification process: Photographing sites of the virtualization of solids not only brings back the material history of the things that clutter our homes, but it also makes the processes and aftermaths of virtualization more legible. Virtualization is not the same as rendering invisible: the degree that we can see air: we begin to see the long history of commoditization and their interactions with ecology. Marx’s famous phrase refers to a material change in the composition of environmental elements, although he could not have anticipated how crucial air and atmospheric changes themselves would become in the fate of capitalism. In an ultimate irony, it is the actual transformation of solids into air that is releasing so much carbon in the atmosphere, such that polluted air may be one of the few things that can slow or stop capitalism. Buryntsky’s photographs dramatize such capitalist-ecological relations of solids to air in the series on the breaking down and recycling of old oil tankers in Chittagong, Bangladesh. The air is often a foggy, humid haze, coating the hilly endeavor of tearing apart ships by hand in a ghostly atmosphere. Turning to shipbuilding and loading Buryntsky’s photographs of shipping containers have a crystal clarity, which makes the rectangles and random colors of the containers seem all the more abstract and indifferent to the human gaze. The relation of air and atmosphere to the ecology of Buryntsky’s photos is crucial, as I will show shortly in an analysis of the aerial shot.

The closer one looks at these images, the more commoditization begins to stare back at their extractors and consumers, as if to complain against the lack of appreciation for their roles in history and ecology. In Tongyu Port, Tianjin—a sea of coal piles fills the frame space, beckoning to be burned for energy. The coal takes up practically all of the visual space, demanding to be looked at frontally or face to face with the viewer (in almost all of Buryntsky’s photographs of specific commodities, the objects suffice all four corners of the visual space). Bruce Robins points to the recent proliferation of “commodity histories” in popular and academic literature (Robins 2005)—such as Barbara Freese’s Coal: A Human History (2003), Stephen Vail’s Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fiber (2006), and The Coffee book: Anatomy of an Industry from Crop to Last Drop (1999), by Gregory Doucet and Nina Lutinger (effectively all major commodities now have biographies)—as evidence of a conflicting attitude toward the way commodities circulate in late capitalism. On the one hand, Robins argues that some books appear like investment prospects when they praise the inexorable democratization of the commodity as it spreads across the globe at cheaper prices (as there seems to be an always expendable surplus of labor ready to extract them). On the other hand, some commodity histories like Freese’s, spend considerable time describing the hellish ways a commodity like coal must be mined, noting that the spread of a commodity is less a democratization than a story of human suffering and addiction juxtaposed with social and economic development. Buryntsky’s commodity photographs are part of this larger cultural turn to trace individual narratives of raw materials rather than funneling all goods toward a single theory of commodity fetishism. Robins wonders what this genre of book is asking of its collective readers: “Looking through a commodity to the human relations behind it, what exactly does one see? Capitalism? Class? Culture? State?” After all, what is the right way to describe a commodity? (Robins 2005: 455). There is a bit of a humanist and globalist bias in Robins’s list here, far behind the commodity one should be able to see the local communities and the earth with its plants and animals as much as large-scale human institutions. But it is striking to note that Robins’s queries can only keep coming, indicating that in our age the commodity has become a series of open questions rather than a solid foundation. The making of the commodity itself Engels and Marx claim, is continuously under question in that “constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones” (1798:476). Such constant agitation of bourgeois life applies directly to how we treat the earth as “uninterrupted disturbance” as well. The open pit mine, continuously scoured, offers a primal scene of these ceaseless upheavals. Buryntsky’s photographs of commodity extraction are open to the same questions Robins poses. They also risk looking like advertisements for the glamor of the commodity that fits the corporation’s heroic self-image of providing for the world. In shooting privately owned land, Buryntsky does not claim to be tricking corporations: he acknowledges that he...
Fig 4 Edward Burtynsky, Mines #22 (1983). Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier, Toronto.

camera is bathed in an immense rust cloud that coats the worker's when they drop a huge slab of reddened steel. It is impossible to romanticize this image not just because of the content but also because the rust cloud even makes the film viewer squint and shield the eyes, bringing pain to a spectacular vision.

In following the life of the commodity, Burtynsky also has supplied a visual documentation of contemporary corporate and labor conditions around sites of extraction and disposal. What has been rarely remarked by critics on Burtynsky's work is that a large portion of his images are of corporate-owned sites. There is a corporate iconography in many of the photographs that is hidden in plain sight. Burtynsky has gained a rapid rise in attention in the last decade from both environmentalists and corporate entities, with both groups looking to his work for the way it sums up contemporary uses of land. However, corporate aesthetics and the role of corporations in aesthetics are rarely discussed in art. Corporate sponsorship of art is gaining in importance alongside individual patronage, which played a major role in supporting the rise of landscape painting in the eighteenth century. Burtynsky's exploratory and creative receptivity to corporate aesthetics puts him in company with pop artists as far back as Andy Warhol. Both Warhol and Burtynsky can range from displaying mimetic to ironic to melancholic relations of art to capital in a single image. Burtynsky courts a corporate audience as much as a public one, and seeks to stage a dialogue between these groups that does not simply begin and end with excommunication for all things corporate.

To me, if you build your polemics around the point that all corporations are bad, it lacks the necessary complexity. It is too narrow and almost a caricature of a view. There are some bad corporations and some good corporations. There are some very bad people who work for the corporations but it is also quite easy for some environmentalists to feel self-righteous, to get up on the soapbox without the full grasp of the complexity of the problem. My goal is to allow dialogue, not to draw lines and start throwing things at each other again, because this has not gotten us anywhere all these years. (Burtynsky 2007a)

Burtynsky is certainly right to press for complexity in regards to the roles of corporations in times of ecological distress; yet much here depends on what "dialogue" really involves, and whether listening to both sides is enough to get a robust environmentalism on its feet. If Burtynsky's photos are really to open dialogue, they must welcome a critical insight into how the capitalist mode of production, the fetishism of commodities, and the adoration of spectacle are inseparable.

Burtynsky's overall strategy reflects from commodity fetishism by rarely showing the world of the finished commodity in action. Rather, he documents the cultures that form around extraction and that linger later after the commodity has been tossed out. Photographs in museums today exist in the wider sphere of the service economy that is closely tied to national aims, but since Burtynsky generally does not depict consumer culture directly, his work instead appeals to crafting national narratives based on the day before and the day after commodification (thus leaving the visual culture of consumption in the hands of corporate ad agencies). As a consequence, his photographs propose to shift national economic identities away from consumerism and services and toward the conjunction of risk and opportunity that happens at the moment of extraction and rejection of raw materials. Canadian nationalism, which Burtynsky accepts as well as critiques, fits between these two economic fates: the nation has become synonymous with the phrase "commodity rich," while it promotes the untouched wilderness (often the same...
areas of commodification) for tourism and consumer advertising. burntynsky has cited his own and his family's labor history in the ontario automotive industry as context for his interests in photographing the impact of industry on nature. visual repetition of rocks, wilderness, and industry common in canadian culture also call forth associations of vigorous manhood challenging and succeeding among the harsh elements. there is a long-standing attraction of the camera to the photogenic aspects of masculinity in industrial workplaces, and burntynsky's pictures of pulverized rocks and open-pit mines project an image of hardscrabble and muscular relations with the land. industrial art photography often features the profile or the shadow of laborers to blend the scenes between worker as unknown hero, as part of the landscape, and as erased by capitalism. in much of burntynsky's early work; however, the industrial worker is palpably absent; but in photographs from 2000 onwards, the laborer is increasingly present and partly part of the landscape as in the china images. in the mass of faces that define the visual space. yet in the way burntynsky photographs such scenes, each worker is distinct but not emphasized, present but not addressed, and integral to the formal composition of the image but not asked to play any role beyond marking the presence of labor. the statistics have both boom and bust already built into them in oil architecture such as pumpjacks and offshore rigs one can see the two faces of these machines—mindless repetition and rust—on the same image. it is perhaps the economy of remarriage through recycling or dumping, even though the initial commodity is sunk up, this is still a process of production in which georges bataille names a "genera economy"—which is becoming the most visible battleground between ecology and economy and is manifest in the unstable theme of sustainability. advocates of sustainability believe that sustainable use should follow through a continuous cycle of a material object, going from "cradle to cradle" or from one beneficial form to another, as william mcdonough and michael braungart argue. burntynsky's photographs document the conjunction of reality and fantasy in the contemporary narratives of sustainable recycling. the series of images of shipbreaking in bangladesh capture the clash of the positive ideas of reuse with the grueling and unhealthy labor that this act really requires. burntynsky shows the raw commodity reemerging in these recycling photographs but with a vengeance as the base matter has become intensely toxic, dangerously unwieldy, and worth accessing only by cheap desperate labor. in shipbreaking recycling 38, hundreds of rusty cast-iron valves sit in a junkyard, practically mocking the collector who would dare attempt to recycle these hunks. the same goes for the giant tire pile in westley, california, which burntynsky photographed in 1999 shortly before it caught on fire and burned for several weeks—a noseous transformation for vulcanized rubber that takes hundreds of thousands of years to biodegrade. in a digital age, one quickly gets used to how persons and things change their ontologies, how identities and forms shift on a daily basis, and it seems coherent to extend this modularity elsewhere. but the resistance to recycling of basic commodities and the incredibly long time it takes many of them to biodegrade makes for a harsh return to a kind of ontological persistence. the physical and cultural conditions of recycling that are at the forefront of sustainability tend to dictate change and structures in burntynsky's photography of dumps, recycling depots and the deconstruction and reconstruction of cities in china. the visual tropes of the monochromatic pile of a single object, the orderly stack, and the hoard of trash, along with actions such as sorting, melting, crushing, weighing, repurposing, reusing, rejecting, cracking, and burning, define his images of this stage of production. in contrast to all these material details and technical actions, consider the most common visual analogues for recycling the blue bin and the triadic molecule-shaped recycling symbol. the symbol, which was designed by gary dean anderson in 1970 for a paperboard company, is supposed to be instantly and universally legible like a street sign. it stresses fluidity and circularity. there is no distinct thing in this recycling loop—everything is virtual and transitional. no human presence can be detected in the icon, and arrows flow into each other by their own momentum. this icon hints at the ideal hope (filing for the late 1950s) that everything can be re-transformed and that there are no true barriers to this endless revolution. instead of being icons for the universal flow of things, burntynsky's photographs of recycling are poised between the malleability of mass quantities and the burdensome intransigence of used things. in the china series, one photograph of debris from battered telephones and another of copious coils of wire are all that is left of the millions of messages these mechanical devices conveyed. the information highway has come and gone for these materials, whose banal thinness threatens to intrude rudely on the ideology of information as immortal, seamless, and virtual. in china recycling 29 (figure 5), stripped motherboard lies strewn in the foreground that takes up two-thirds of the image, while the other one-third is a dense, lush forest. both the trees and boards are green and brown but unrecognizable to each other. in ferrous bashing 46, an image of a mass of mostly triangular metal shapes also permits a silver of green to mix into the frame that is dominated by silver colors. the shapes of leftover punched metal are radically anti-arthropomorphic—if you ran your hand across them, the jagged metals would turn the hand into ground beef in one caress. the photographs of shipbuilding and shipbreaking depict huge metal skeletons but of the shape that no animal could ever be. the cumulative effect of these images of recycling make us think of natural structures increasingly look like a world that is post-human and dominated by hulking inorganic commodities. in the film manufactured landscapes (dir: dennis baichwal, 2007), burntynsky arrives at a rural village in china devoted to recycling computers and other electronics that are full of toxins and leaching heavy metals into the water. the image of burntynsky taking an old woman peacefully sorting materials on the stoop of her house confirms the anti-human proportions that recycling has taken. this woman has become a combination of machine and human, but instead of the sleek fantasies of the agile and technoskilled cyborg, she is marked by the less glorious science fiction.
matters of junkyards, toxicity, and the manual labor of recycling small computer parts.

The capacity to remake the world through recycling reaches stunning proportions in Burtnyski's photographs of the manual destruction of cities in China forced to make way for the Three Gorges Dam. One gets the impression that the Chinese government can virtualize and materialize its own cities at will. City dwellers in the way of the dam are paid by the brick and rebar to take their cities apart in a few weeks, while in other cities dozens of skyscrapers and coal-powered electricity plants rise every week. This is an epic form of recycling whole cities and brings the displacement and mobility characteristic of urban life to an astonishing level. In Fengjie #3 and #4, a dystopian, a few green trees stand out in the top left corner in a landscape of deconstructed buildings strewn with concrete, bricks dust, and rebar. The only other evidence of life is a few pitched tents and a scattering of workers with hammers and other hand tools. The gray, dusty tone and bombed-out appearance of this photograph is familiar from science fiction wastelands.

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Figure 5 Edward Burtynsky, China Recycling #9 (2004). Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier. Toronto.

Fig. 5 Edward Burtynsky, China Recycling #9 (2004). Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier. Toronto.

overwhelmed North-American individual when he sees these photos as a “dystopian sublime” (Mayer 2005: 10). Mayer’s comment that, “For fans of Burtynsky’s images, it will seem like he has hit the motherlode by going to China” (10), seems only half aware of the resonance of this statement with Burtynsky’s mining photographs (“mother-lode”). This metaphor feminizes China while suggesting a “heart of darkness”-like trip made by the heroic lone photographer into the depths of the dystopian. What is so terrifying or frightening here? According to Mayer, “Folded into these series are pictures of countless workers like so many anonymous pawns in an endless zone of absolute utilitarian efficiency” (10). This comment seems particularly symptomatic of Mayer’s own First World anxieties, since it could be said that the photos depict the exact opposite: instead of “airless,” Burtynsky’s point is that there is tremendous art and aesthetic details (intentional or not) in these zones, and instead of anonymous and countless workers because of the high resolution of the camera, we can make out many faces of the workers showing various attitudes from focus to exhaustion to staring uncomfortably back at the camera. The factory floors are clean and make extensive use of natural lighting, which may contribute to an “absolute utilitarian efficiency,” but the dystopian tagline is dubious. Democraies have created and used plenty of abstraction methods, including, of course, the Ford assembly line. In a collective essay on the China series photographs, Xiaobei Chen warns against perceptions of Chinese workers that treat them as Orientalized other by casting them as passive, robotic, and agency-less. Such categorizations of the Chinese laborer reflect back on the notion of threat that also circulates in discourses surrounding photographs of China’s manufacturing sector: China’s emergence as a great economic and political power definitely produces unease in the West (particularly as its massive population joins the ranks of the consumer society; further straining world resources, and dominating global manufacturing). ... A photograph of assembly line workers in a North American factory would probably communicate ‘jobs’ to the viewer: a meaning that may be missing in Western interpretations of photographs of manufacturing in China” (Gallimigree et al. 2010: 79).

China’s top-down model of sociopolitical control works synthetically with an aggressive Fordist assembly line economy, but in Burtynsky’s photographs the workers are not huddled in dark, unhealthy chambers or chained to their chairs (worker abuse in China exists but it is not portrayed in these photos). These workers know well the work is boring and regimented (which is not the same as nefariously dystopian), and that the aesthetics of the workplace expose them to natural light to make the workers more visible but also more comfortable (and more easily photographable). The assumption that individuality is the opposite of repetition, habit, order, and discipline corresponds to the same fantasy that buying one of the mass-produced objects in these photographs is a choice expressive of one’s unique creative personality. With these photographs, the point is not to oppose (First World) individuality to (Second and Third World) de-individuation but to see how they are two sides of the same integrated world condition under capitalism. The capacity to move quickly between states of individualization and de-individuation—and analogous to how Burtynsky’s photographs exist between singularity and repetition—is increasingly defining personhood today in a world where matter, affect, and capital circulate in intensely rapid and varying forms.

Aerial Art: Looking Up at Down

In the history of the photography of nature, the idea of conservation, as both good ecology and nostalgia for a vanishing frontier and an untouched wilderness, dominated in visual
perspectives up until the 1960s. The earth art and land art photography of the 1960s and 1970s marked a shift to "new topographies," as one important museum exhibit called it (which included urban landscapes, rural ruins, and sculpted earth), welcoming a new aesthetic relation to land at varying scales. But early land art was, for the most part, strangely non-ecological. Works by Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer and Carl Andre, among others, tended to involve no animals and usually no humans, and often imposed a large elementary form on a landscape that had little to do with the existing ecosystem in which it stood. Such art focused on formal, medium-specific, large-scale aesthetic encounters that critiqued the closed environments of galleries and museums, but usually did not offer a close engagement with local environmental nuances. For example, De Maria’s Desert X (1969), a chalk drawing of a giant cross on a desert plain, raises questions of materiality, scale, and map, which could open up to broader ecological matters; but the relation of the cross to a specific ecological issue is never made. Heizer’s Double Negative (1969), a giant trench sculpted out of rock in Nevada, provokes thoughts about negative space and human power used to create such gashes, but this work features an initial violence to the landscape that threatens to go against ecological practices of trying to minimize the traces of one's impact on an ecosystem. Smithson’s work early on was also influenced by issues of urban decay and pollution; however, much of his major earth art work has an ambivalent relation to environmental crises. His series of pours, including Asphalt Randolph (1969), a one-time dumping of a truck full of black asphalt down a dirt slope, and Gue Pour (1970), a jetting of 45 gallons of glue down a dirt hill, were acts of pollution themselves, but for Smithson demonstrated foremost the emergence of form and its subsequent entropy, as the works washed away over time. In 1970 Smithson proposed covering a small island with broken glass, but was thwarted by a wide coalition of environmentalist activists and local organizations. Only in the last years of Smithson’s life did he start to move earth art in the direction of environmental reclamation projects. In a project proposed but not completed before his death in 1973, Smithson sought to claim a work of art the giant copper mine in Bingham, which he photographed a decade before Burtnysky's own picture. At the bottom of the mine site sits a pool of water, and Smithson planned to install a series of lines of earth arcing out to create a visual effect of a whirlpool, suggesting a drain, a mythic form connoting danger and an enigmatic source of energy.

The tension between a more formalist earth art and an activist environmental art runs through both Smithson’s and Burtnysky’s work. Smithson’s 1969 essay “Aerial Art” introduced a conceptual shift in art making that welcomed the scaling perspective of the aerial view since such an angle revealed abstract aesthetic forms and artificial, human-made geographical forces in one glance. “The older landscape of naturalism and realism is being replaced by the new landscape of abstraction and artifice” (Smithson 1996:116). As Smithson argued, the aerial view precluded pastoral fantasies of nature’s bounty, since from the sky “[t]he landscape begins to look more like a three-dimensional map rather than a rustic garden. Aerial photography and air transportation bring into sharp focus the ‘surface features of this shifting world of perspectives’” (Smithson 1996:116). At the time of this essay, Smithson was collaborating on a design for the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. For Smithson aerial art was as much an aesthetic point of view as a technological force, a collaboration of human and machine, and a poetics to the future associations of air travel and air space.

Burtnysky’s photographs since 2000 increasingly favor an aerial or elevated point of view, a formal and technical decision that has significant ramifications for the ecological implications of his work. Up until Smithson’s generation, most landscape photography had been taken from a position of human eyes at walking level. These photos made scale palpable with wide lenses shooting a distant horizon often slightly tilted upward, reinforcing tropes of sublimity or progress. Burtnysky plays on these tropes in shots like the Oxford Fire Pile series, where the towers of fires seem about to topple over and engulf the ground-level camera. The aerial shot along with the elevated shot, taken from a ladder crane, or lift, puts the camera in a dominant position over its object, making a large stretch of land legible in new ways. But it also banishes the street-level point of view to a quaint, limited, and amateur status. Only professional photographers have the expenses and wherewithal to shoot from the sky and such angles exemplify costly professionalism against the proliferation of cheap, handheld digital cameras. Furthermore, the aerial shot shares company with a variety of nonhuman points of view, including surveillance cameras, military and industrial reconnaissance, satellites, Google Earth Internet technology, geographical mapping and surveying, and also ecological imaging technology.

These visual technologies are expensive and integrated into a larger network of capital, scientific research, and new media cultures that dwarf the individual photographer. The elevated and technologically mediated points of view favor images of pattern, series, mass data, large-scale gradations and changes, and are uniquely poised to capture the dissolution of these into chaos.

Aerial shots bypass the intimacy of the street-level human gaze and go with their strengths the ability to capture scales of space and time not set according to human sensibility. In the conjunction of scale and technology, the aerial shot is post-human. It makes a large landscape visible in a single glance but at the cost of putting it all out of reach of individual human hands; although not beyond human affect. In Burtnysky’s aerial shots, especially those of polluted "ecoscapes" such as the Alberta tar sands, the shot begins from the assumption of a paradox that there is no way to bridge aerial vision with individual human agency on the ground; even if what we are witnessing is the accumulation of human activity. In Alberta Oil Sands #6 (Figure 6), we recognize Burtnysky’s characteristic attraction to massive geometrical...
forms—this time two huge rectangular tailing pools of an eerie sallow yellow with streaks of red leaching in. The pools appear as flat planes tilted upward, drawing the eye to the horizon line at the top of the image where smokestacks loom in the background. Because a huge amount of the bitumen is minable near the earth’s surface, the tar sands are exposed to vision in an inverse proportion to the way that most underground oil extraction is hidden. Proceeding from the premise that the tar sands cannot but be visually exposed, only an aerial shot can capture the epic scale of extraction and pollution. Yet aerial shots taken from a gliding airplane or helicopter also have the feel of taking a step back and away from the worries of the ground, finding relief in soaring over devastation, suggesting a point of view beyond good and evil and vacuously passing this on to the viewer of the photograph. Burtynsky’s sky-based shots also feel particularly post-human in that humans, if they appear in the frame, are reduced to blips, while large machines are far more recognizable. But if the post-human sounds too apocalyptic, it needs to be said that ecology is so complex and urgent that the more

plodding machines. In his oil series, Burtynsky has for the first time chosen to include photographs of large human communal moments—in this case, rallies and races that accrete around cars and motorcycles—yet the combination of hauntedness and blitheness carries through as well to these scenes of spectacular consumption at the dizzying heights of peak oil. Although many of Burtynsky’s photographs have an end-of-days feel in their stark yet cool look at the rise and fall of precious commodity resources, we are probably just at the beginning of the era of manufactured landscapes. For example, the concept of “geoengineering” is beginning to gain adherents as a form of global biopolitics that could, like disaster capitalism, find a way to profit from environmental catastrophe. Geoengineering involves manipulating natural processes at a planetary level to manage or mitigate changes in the environment due to global warming. Examples of geoengineering include salting clouds to make rain, blowing tiny flecks of reflective material like sulfates into the air to ward off sunrays and cool the earth, and creating carbon-eating bacteria and unleashing it widespread into the oceans to capture greenhouse gases. All these ideas are said to be not so expensive as to be impossible; they also offer huge potential for private business to develop functional technology to such ends (Goodell 2009; Laudon and Thomson 2010). However, all such actions would produce further pollution and toxicity, certainly contributing to the killing of some life, with other unintended consequences, and may still not be effective. Proponents of researching such options, including climate scientists, political and military theorists, and futurologists, tend to swing from caution to a gambler’s sense of hope betting with his final dollar (Vicente et al. 2009).

There may be no real difference between manufactured landscapes and geoengineering; both operations rend the geological sublime for political and economic purposes. If, so, at the heart of Burtynsky’s photographs there is a tremendous crisis of agency at ground level, for even if the landscapes he captures are human-made, in what sense can one still comprehend them in terms of human actions? The cumulative effect of centuries of labor on the earth has now reached levels where systemic changes created by our actions are as strong as, or stronger than, the sum of our capacities to act. In Burtynsky’s photographs there are very few human beings doing much that could be called action, much less repair, in distinction to physical labor. However, this deficit forces the viewer of these photos to consider what action could look like beyond human voluntarism and rationalism, where systems patterns, catastrophes, and accidents or unintended consequences will be major ecological players. And to this list of ecological actors that runs from human to inhuman to nonhuman, one can add images.

Notes

1 In a 2009 interview, Burtynsky distanced himself from the kind of eco-activism done by groups such as Greenpeace. See http://petroko.blogspot.com/2009/02/edward-burtynsky-interview.html (accessed July 20, 2013). See also an earlier interview from 2007 with the media outlet Tretnugger, where Burtynsky explains his position as advocating sustainability instead of radical environmentalism: “I think what’s happening is that people are looking at it, and are beginning to understand and kind of pick up where I think the environmental movement failed—the sustainability movement is, I think, a much more healthy model, and it includes both government and corporate practice, as well as what the environmentalists and certain citizens… bring” (Burtynsky 2007b).

2 For some media-specific ecocritical analyses, see for example Dobrin and Morey (2005), Willoquet-Mancini (2010), and Brower (2011).

3 See www.edwardburtynsky.com for more images.

4 Rio Tinto, the Australian-based mining company that is the world’s largest and now owns the Kennecott mine, includes a short animated movie, from Ore to Ore, on their website, which tells the story of copper from extraction to finished
commodity. The movie plays with a mock 1950s all-American aesthetic and wrinkles in jokes about the lack of hypnosis or cool culture in earthmoving and mining. Available online http://www.kenandco.com/ (accessed July 2011).

5 Braungart and McDonough (2000) argue that a creative sense of design can find ways to reuse materials over and over; in effect trying to render useful the obsolescence or even entropy of the object.

6 When I screened Manufactured Landscapes for students in an environmental literature course, most of them felt that the most disturbing image was of the Bangladesh shipbreakers. Because of the high risks of injury and the blatant health hazards, these workers are exposed to severe conditions while contributing to the ostensibly green and sustainable recycling economy that the students have put their trust in.


8 Goodell (2009) recognizes how disturbingly fortuitous it is that the industries that most contributed to pollution are also, potentially, the best positioned to reap profits on geoengineering in the future since they can provide materials and monitor what one could call a “manufactured earth.”

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References


