

Landscape in Motion

Cinematic views of an uncertain tomorrow

13.03.-26.10.2015

Space02

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This text is published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Kunsthaus Graz

Universalmuseum Joanneum

March 13 until October 26, 2015

In cooperation with *Camera Austria, Diagonale 2015* and the *Austrian Film Museum*

Looking down on the Earth from space proved a radical demonstration before our very eyes of the finiteness of useable surfaces in the landscape. One result was the emergence of the ecological movement. Our notion of images and how we handle them has also undergone lasting changes in parallel with advances in technology and media.

Landscape in Motion shows works that examine the concept of landscape from the perspective of temporality and constant change. Landscape as a construction becomes apparent particularly via the medium of film, in which constant movement is an internal condition.

Anthropocene

Untouched nature has become a rare phenomenon. For millennia now, humankind has had an influence on their environment through their way of life, by changing the ground and the air above areas of land and so contributing to global warming. Industrialisation, however, has led to an acceleration in human interventions, and their scale is also growing exponentially. As a result, Nobel Prize winner Paul J. Crutzen proposed in 2000 that we stop using the term 'Holocene' in the geological timescale and instead speak of the 'Anthropocene' (ancient Greek: *ánthropos*, man). He had recognised that chemicals were attacking the protective ozone layer around the Earth and argued spontaneously and fairly heatedly at a conference that it was clear that the Age of Man had dawned. The debate continues as to whether this term for the latest geological age should be officially adopted. It must first be demonstrated that *man* has already had such a significant impact on the Earth and its structure that we have fundamentally altered its charac-

teristics and its climate. Irrespective of this, the discussion has triggered deeper reflections about humankind's treatment of the world, about its resources, climate change and potential global perspectives for the future. Very few areas survive where human traces are not already inscribed: cities, arable and pasture lands, industrial zones, landfill sites, forestry plantations, roads, mining operations and vast reservoirs demonstrate at a global level the power of humankind to exploit the Earth's resources exhaustively. Areas that are not scattered with the traces of mankind's activities or signs of its consequences have become a rarity.

Nature?

For a long time, 'nature' was defined as an antonym for 'human' and our culture: nature was everything that had not been created by humankind. For how much longer, however, can we go on imagining 'nature' without humankind? French sociologist Bruno Latour has for some time now been trying to challenge the thinking behind this, and to call

attention to a *Parliament of Things*: humankind is only part of a greater system, just as animals or other things are. We should be reworking our notion of the natural sciences as supposedly objective sciences, and exposing the political powers that exploit them. As a relatively young science, political ecology has the task of investigating the effects of ecological changes on human communities, but should also question the extent to which terms such as 'nature' and 'environment' are constructions. The opposing interests and aims of politics, the economy or science inevitably lead to problems in this—we should be finding strategies for resolving these together. According to Latour, we need a new culture that mediates between different *modes of existence*. It seems clear that 'man' can no longer be considered as separate from 'nature'; our bonds with the Earth system are basically indisputable. It is therefore also logical to talk of a human system with an embedded ecological system. The perspective from which these relationships are seen has shifted.

The growing exploitation of nature for human requirements that began with industrialisation is also reflected in the relevance of the theme within art. Art takes a look at landscapes and their different qualities.

Art

Visual artists also make use of nature, but above all they make it a theme of their work. The romanticising view of nature, the description of a paradise, the search for idyllic landscapes or the staging of scenic beauty are recurrent themes in art history. Many of our internal images of landscape are shaped by ideas from art or literature, and often we encounter these images increasingly stylised in the media and advertising world of everyday life, where landscape is usually depicted as a place of yearning. In contemporary art, nature becomes the thematic reference point, distanced from the view of a romanticism of nature; the focus is instead directed towards science and discussing forms of ecological politics. Organic materials are incorporated into art,

referring to the finiteness of natural resources and demonstrating the aspect of transience. If you perceive nature from a distance, it at once becomes landscape that is concretised in the viewpoint through which it is manipulated and interpreted. What does the segment show, who is it for, and what is the aim behind it?

Landscape

Landscape is often seen as a characteristic expression of the nature of a particular area of land. When we think about landscape, then often the images that come to mind are of distant horizons and memorable light and weather conditions, but also those of urban landscapes, roofscapes or seascapes. We talk about untouched natural landscapes, of cultivated landscapes, of intact landscapes, protected landscapes, but less readily about spoiled or even destroyed landscapes. The notion of landscape seems to hold largely positive connotations. 'Why is landscape beautiful?', **Lucius Burckhardt**—the founder of strollology—asked in 1979, in order to demonstrate

that landscape is chiefly a construct. It is not to be found primarily in the phenomena of the environment, but rather in the minds of the viewers. The more our expectations are met by what we see, the greater our satisfaction. The capacity to filter our gaze and blank out any irritations is also an advantage in this process.

Perception of landscape

In order to perceive landscape *outdoors in the open air*, a view from a certain distance is needed. Mountain peaks are climbed in order to attain the view from above, to be able to perceive a broader landscape, in order literally to widen the horizon emerging from the valley. This distance is created by the image and the camera. In the 20th century, the notion of landscape was linked above all with the camera's perspective. Flying, and the techniques of photography and also film have altered our view of the landscape. In the mid-19th century, hot air balloon photography provided the first glimpses of Paris from a

bird's eye view. The 1860s also saw the first aerial photographs in America, showing Boston from above. Military interests have constantly advanced and expanded the technologies and scope of landscape photography. Nowadays, unmanned drones are already taking over this work. Thus the camera has broken away not only from the ground but also from the eye of the filmmaker. The growing speed of flight and increase in the distance from the Earth's surface broadened the overview: we could see further, see more, and see faster and faster. The overcoming of gravity and the development of space travel made a view of the entire globe possible from the perspective of motion. A number of built structures and geographical changes caused by humankind have reached such proportions that they are visible from space. In the meantime, we have become used to the bird's eye view. Any one of us can use Google Maps at home to view the whole world from above, to zoom in and fly about in the virtual world. Actual flight has become a standard for global mobility, leaving profound traces on the Earth's climate.

Land Art

Views from above, flight over areas of land and the apocalyptic visions this involved were fundamental to the emergence of Land Art. One of its main works is the *Spiral Jetty*, constructed by **Robert Smithson** in the Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1970. 6000 tonnes of basalt stone blocks form a 460-metre long and 5-metre wide coil, making an aesthetic pattern in the salt lake. Over a period of nearly three months and 625 working hours the huge volcanic boulders were placed in the lake, after an extensive logistical preliminary work. Smithson chose a place in the desert where the oil industry had already shut down operations but had left behind its traces in the form of scrap and debris. For this work, his interest lay in the dichotomy of nature and culture. Within this the impact of industry and technology on the landscape played a role on the one hand, while on the other hand there also stood the effects of nature: salt crystals grow in a spiral lattice. Robert Smithson, who was killed in a plane crash in 1973, produced

works that address temporal changes to landscapes and involve their own transience. The work created here can no longer be viewed as a (museum) object, but needs to be experienced in the landscape itself, there is a need for movement through the landscape, the changes in water levels and the current weather conditions so that one can perceive the work. Land Art took a liberating step (particularly in the USA) away from exhibition spaces and their established conditions, and out into the landscape. A documentary film and programmatic essays such as *The Monuments of Passaic* do nonetheless belong to Smithson's sculptural work allowing the survival and the reception of the work within an art context, far from the huge jetty in the salt lake, whose visibility depends on natural conditions.

“‘Nature’ is simply another 18th- and 19th century fiction,” said Robert Smithson and so emphasised his reservations concerning a positive ideology of progress and its irreversible changes. Set in the middle of the industrial ruins of a modern-prehistoric world, the *Spiral Jetty* is for him a

return to the source. Robert Smithson's work gave the abandoned place a new attraction, drawing tourists and curious onlookers.

James Benning visited this place for his film *casting a glance* (2007) about 16 times over two years, in order to capture the *Spiral Jetty* and its varying water levels. While Smithson's film captures the spiral in a lively way, making it visible in the first place as a whole from above, Benning remains on the ground, recording its meditative form and the tranquillity of its existence by using long camera shots.

In 1997, the British artist **Tacita Dean** attempted (as did James Benning 10 years later) to track down the *Spiral Jetty*, portraying this in her work *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty*. She obtained a detailed set of directions and set off with a colleague. The sound recording documents their search for the artwork. However, the landscape had altered and the directions describing the way no longer worked. The edited sound document becomes a fiction, the *Spiral Jetty* remains unfound.

Seeing landscape in motion

In *California Trilogy*, the American filmmaker **James Benning** focuses on the landscape of California, where he had come to live in 1987 as a teacher at the Institute of Arts (CalArts). The first part, *El Valley Centro* (1999), mainly shows agricultural areas and their usage. The second part, *Los* (2000), is dedicated to the greater Los Angeles area, while the third part *Sogobi* (2001) portrays the Californian wilderness in its unspoiled state. The three films share a common structure: they are 90 minutes long, and made up of 35 shots each lasting two and a half minutes. The precisely selected image sections show sequenced moving pictures in which stories have been inscribed. They make clear the extent of human interventions in very different landscapes.

For *La Région Centrale* (1971), **Michael Snow** mounted a camera firmly embedded in the centre of an isolated mountain summit in Quebec. For five days he made the camera rotate in all directions, with only the speed of the camera movements being deter-

mined beforehand. *La Région Centrale* (1971) shows the landscape in a real place; each (image) section appears to wander randomly with the eye of the camera. The unusual image dynamics mean that the film is distanced from the documentary style, and yet in the solitude of the place depicts the rugged mountains in their cosmic subjection in a completely authentic way. (The film can be seen on Wednesdays and Sundays in the exhibition).

For his work *Every Building On The Sunset Strip* (1966), **Ed Ruscha** mounted a camera with a motor onto the loading platform of a pick-up truck and during the drive photographed one building after the other along the Sunset Strip between Hollywood and Beverly Hills, first on one side, and then on the other. In this early 'street view' (which has since become a permanently available digital reality), Ed Ruscha shows how landscape can be perceived through motion. The street that Ed Ruscha records topographically becomes an artwork that, presented as a fold-out brochure in large quantities, also calls into question its value and

exclusivity. Ed Ruscha records the street meticulously; the backdrop to everyday life becomes a carefully documented trip—and a walk alongside the display case.

The American research organisation **Center for Land Use Interpretation** (CLUI) examines the perception and fate of physically exploited landscapes in America. The view from above, this kind of investigation of the landscape, is reminiscent of Robert Smithson's work. Their *landscans* are high-resolution videos taken by a camera during a flight. The view soars gently over the landscape, which is marked with massive human traces. Motorways cutting through the landscape, evaporating salt lakes, vast oilfields and refineries demonstrate why the theory of the Anthropocene is being discussed so intensively across the world. CLUI is convinced that the landscape produced by humankind is a cultural inscription into nature that says a lot about humankind itself.

Narrations of landscape

For Allan Sekula, landscape is a priori a space that is inhabited by humans and always has a social topography inscribed into it. Critical of capitalism, his works often assign a special role to the global economy and its local repercussions. In his work *Vietnam Village, San Pedro, July 1975* (1975-2011) from the photographic series *California Studies* (1973-77), we see scenes played out in front of a fence that is high and barbed enough to block the path of any undesired persons. The fence refers to refugee camps in California in which Vietnamese immigrants underwent 6 months of naturalisation training. Although the majority of the American population were against their naturalisation, President Ford had guaranteed them special status at the end of the Vietnam War. The ghettos, whose expanse is measured by driving cars in Sekula's images, were dispersed from 1977, the refugees spread across the country. These two early works address the theme of immigration, but also the process of making pictures itself. In the series *Cliffhanger*,

San Pedro, July 1975 (1975-2011) we see various scenes that could be taken from a film; key frames are sequenced one after the other as if in a serial. The landscape becomes the backdrop and the medium of the action. A text that can be read like a film script demonstrates that in this work the theme of migration is likewise central.

In *EDEN'S EDGE* (2014) by **Gerhard Tremel, Leo Calice** and their team, we look from above onto a sandy, dry landscape, the soil of the 'Wild West', onto a stereotypical road movie backdrop. The main roles in these videos are played by various people who have moved to the Californian desert in order to live beyond civilisation. Their stories negotiate the boundary between fiction and reality not far from Hollywood, where the American dream of the land of opportunity is dreamed over and over again. From the bird's eye view, the gaze is concentrated on the stories of the individuals. The landscape was constructed as a model for the film; it becomes sheer fiction and the medium of the narratives. In *Captive Horizon* (2014) by

Lukas Marxt, we are at first not quite sure what we are looking at. From a bird's eye view, a camera moves above surface structures that we cannot always clearly identify as micro- or macrostructures. Is this a desert landscape, a moon landscape or simply dust? As in Robert Smithson's work, now and then we can hear the sound of a helicopter, which merges with the sound of the sea. We remain undecided. The view from above is reversed. Instead of broadening the view, or providing an overview, the extreme zoom creates an abstraction that makes the landscape become an extensive pattern; the camera view sometimes seems almost to want to drill into the earth, and scrabbles across the ground at high speed. Who is flying? Who is seeing? Where from? *Captive Horizon* shows views of Lanzarote in which the human traces have been hidden.

In his work *In the Between* (2006), British artist **Darren Almond** follows the new railway line between Xining in China and Lhasa in Tibet. This stretch of line is also known as the 'Road to Heaven' and is intended,

according to the Chinese authorities, to liberate Tibet from its isolation and promote its development. For many observers from all over the world, however, the railway line poses a threat to Tibetan culture and identity. Almond uses the motion of the train journey to describe the country between two places, but also between two worlds. A striking acoustic setting of singing and sounds accompanies the journey.

In his melancholy animation *Minguo Landscape* (2007), which picks up on the style of traditional Chinese ink drawings, the Shanghai-based **Qiu Anxiong** speaks of a long-gone era of profound changes in the last century in China. *Minguo* describes the turbulent period of the Republic of China, which lasted from 1912 to 1949 and officially came to an end at the close of the civil war and with Mao Zedong's assumption of power. The Japanese invasion, the civil war and the beginning of communism are all portrayed in the same tone, with an impotent landscape that shifts by itself. With almost dream-like lyricism and a critique that treads quietly in the shoes of tradition,

Anxiong describes China's social progress—in which 600 million are supposed to have been liberated from poverty—as a revolutionary environment and social change.

The medium shapes the landscape

In the Himalayas, at 5,200 metres above sea level and in harsh conditions, the Chinese artist **Shi Guorui** erected a huge camera obscura that, with an exposure of over eight hours, captured this 8-metre long image on light-sensitive paper. With a diameter measuring 1.6 millimetres, the pinhole camera allowed a view removed from time, one which seems to stand above the things, above the mass tourism of Mount Everest. The numerous expeditions and bustling activities in the thin air in order to climb the highest mountain in the world are lost in the long exposure time. The waiting and observing of the artist during the creation of the picture is transferred onto the observation of his picture; we are drawn into the depth of the last valley before the ascent. In this

well-composed section the mountain wins back its dignity.

As is the case with many of her earlier works, *Definition Landfill* by **Rosa Barba** is both sculptural and cinematic at the same time. The projector, which allows the 35-mm film to run on a loop, is a large machine. The anachronistic projection demonstrates the power and meaning of technology, its equipment and scope, as yielded by the industrial developments of the last 200 years. From a helicopter, Barba's film shows a stepped landscape in a scenic way from above. Beyond this, a robot's voice narrates how deposits in the area can be described as archaeological burial mounds, merged earthworks or earth pyramids. The ambivalence between the beauty of the shot and the continuous documentation of the landscape changed by man also illustrates the significance of time with regards to constant human interventions.

South Tyrolean artist **Walter Niedermayr** is interested in landscape in which people appear. Seiersberg, located south of Graz, is part of the series *Artefakte*

(since 1992), which investigates urban landscapes, flyovers, motorway bridges and junctions. The completely analogue photos appear to have been overexposed. Their brightness counteracts the perspective depth effect of the road and creates a balance with the vegetation. The selected image details make the street become an element in the pictorial composition, an image pattern that inscribes the dynamics of the motorway onto the clear landscape segment.

Where are we going with the Anthropocene?

The films of **Ursula Biemann** address the themes of climate change, migration politics, gender issues and also the global economy, and in doing so she always seeks contact with the people in situ. *Deep Weather* (2013) shows the pictures of a research trip that on the one hand led to Alberta in the affluence of Canada and on the other hand to Bangladesh, one of the poorest regions in the world. In Alberta the film depicts state-funded oil sands whose massive greenhouse gas

emissions contribute to global warming; in Bangladesh we see how earth walls are built to prepare for the threat of flooding. The glacier retreat is a global phenomenon that does not spare the Himalayas. The meltwater from the glaciers poses a threat to the neighbouring river areas.

Slowly the icebreaker makes its way through the thick ice and in doing so follows the artist **Guido van der Werve**, who is walking across the ice just in front of the ship. In an overpowering fashion the boat determines the perfectly composed image and at the same time satirises the landscape pictures of Romanticism. Whereas in Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting *The Sea of Ice* (1823/24) the power of nature still stands in the foreground and the small boat is sinking between the many towering ice floes, van der Werve's ship becomes the symbol of an all-powerful human force. The man is small and unprotected in comparison, but he strides ahead and determines the direction. And yet at the same time he is—like the thinning ice—threatened by technical and economic achievements.

Resourcen

Within the discussion regarding the Anthropocene, the issue of resources and their sustainable management is key.

As early as 1969, **David Nez** exhibited his *Project – a heater warms the thermometer on the wall, Novi Sad*. The 'fever' that is produced by constant energy use affects the Earth itself.

The Styrian **Markus Jeschaunig** has also addressed the theme of energy and its use in many works, and also its aesthetic impact on the (urban) landscape. The hour-glass filled with crude oil reminds us that time will run out. Stocks of the raw material crude oil and the raw material sand needed by industry are dwindling.

Sandbank by **Klaus Schafler** (2015), which visitors encounter in front of the doors to the Kunsthaus, refers to society's growing responsibility in the Anthropocene by highlighting mineral exploitation and the toxic filling of hollowed out tracts of land.

Mathias Kessler shows the apocalyptic effects of coalmining. The cemetery remains as a relic in the middle of the rutted landscape. One can only access it through the devastated land with the permission of the company.

Armin Linke is part of the *Anthropocene Observatory*, belonging to the large-scale Anthropocene research project in Berlin. The work there includes an investigation to date the beginning of the Anthropocene and thus the end of the Holocene.

Man in the Holocene is a story by Max Frisch produced in 1979, in which Herr Geiser fears that an entire mountain will slide onto the village as a result of a seemingly never-ending storm. In his isolation, the old man struggles with forgetfulness and comes to a conclusion: 'What does Holocene mean! Nature does not need names. This much Herr Geiser knows. The stones do not need his memory.'

During the Anthropocene, discussed since the turn of the millennium, humankind has already won the upper hand. The outcome

remains uncertain—as in the works by **Marine Hugonnier** from the series *Towards Tomorrow* (2001–2003). Her view of the international dateline into the future is already past, when the captured moment has become present.

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