8

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

The Return of Landscape

source:

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 8 (2014)

URL:

https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2014/8-the-return-of-landscape/the-return-of-landscape

doi:

https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2014.8.1417

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

keywords:

abstract:

The introduction to the issue.

-

The Return of Landscape

The title of this issue's cover image, a photograph from Trevor Paglen's series "Limit Telephotography," points to the precise time and place of its production: *Open Hangar; Cactus Flats, NV; Distance ~ 18 miles; 10:04 A.M*, recalling the style of military location data. The information it fails to disclose are the exact geographical parameters, which could in fact describe either: the spot, from which the photograph was captured, or the photographed objects, locations separated by as much as 18 miles. The distance, as well as time of day and atmospherical conditions, all contribute to the blurring of shapes and colors, creating a visual effect, which doesn't quite suit the dry, unexciting title. It is precisely the tension between a politics based on “hard” scientific facts and political aesthetics that serves as the basis for Paglen's subversions of the landscape genre.

Situated in Nevada state, Cactus Flats is part of a huge military complex, stretching over 4,500 square miles. This vast area remains inaccessible for ordinary citizens – both physically and visually, as it is forbidden to photograph the base. In light of this, it seems important to ask what is it exactly that we see in Paglen's photograph of a military hangar? On one hand, we see that, which is usually invisible, objects and sites erased from Google maps, hidden from the unarmed eye, mysterious and surrounded by legends (the infamous Area 51 is part of the complex). Paglen – who holds a PhD in geography, as well as an MFA – implements academic research methods in his examinations of military technologies, symbols, and sites. Multiple hours devoted to landscape observation through self-

constructed photographic equipment resulted in the acquisition of unique knowledge about the visual displays of military activities, perceptible changes of the landscape resulting from confidential activities (e.g. Paglen knows how to distinguish different types of drones by the shapes they form in the sky). On the other hand, it seems that the goal behind pointing specialist telescopes to a distant earthly horizon, instead of using them to study cosmic spaces (as they were designed to do), is the will to examine the complex conditions of visuality. The goal isn't only to expose concealed elements of the landscape, to reveal what is hidden behind the horizon. The artist-geographer doesn't seek out the clearest and sharpest shots. His images are meant to emphasize distance and point to the ways in which it destabilizes vision. The bent and fuzzy shapes, blurry and opaque forms correspond to the spectral status of the photographed objects. As if it were a reversed mirage – the objects looming on the horizon undoubtedly exist and have an immense effect on our reality, and yet they are something most of us don't want to see. As he sets up his photographer's post in public spaces, risking being harassed by the police, his goal is more than just to expose, uncover and render visibility to the previously invisible. In Paglen's demand for the "right to look," we hear not only a will to see everything and to see it clearly, but above all to change the conditions of seeing. He reveals the potentially countervisual force – to use Nicholas Mirzoeff's term – of the landscape genre.

Paglen's interventions are also a commentary on the history of the landscape as medium, visual form, and genre („For me, seeing the drone in the twenty-first century is a little bit like Turner seeing the train in the nineteenth century," says the artist). As many art historians emphasize, the development of landscape painting was closely tied to the evolution of the nation state and the execution of imperial power (unsurprisingly the genre reached its peak of popularity in the nineteenth century). In traditional landscapes, authority executes its power not

through censorship – banning representations – but through aestheticization, which allows for the concealment of exclusions and injustices, as well as apparent objectivization of vantage point. Here, power operates not through the implementation of bans on what can be seen, but through the act of framing, the process of cutting out seemingly complete and natural views. Such an understanding of landscape is still operative today, visible in the actions of huge corporations such as, among others, Google, a company set on photographically recording the whole world – both vertically (Google Earth) and horizontally (Google Street View). This is perhaps why W.J.T. Mitchell claimed that landscape, as a genre of representation, is an "exhausted medium, no longer viable as a mode of artistic expression," a medium which has to be left to the large (Google) and small (creators of kitschy landscape paintings) actors of the art and media industry.

In this issue of „View," we examine images, which – as in Paglen's work – have the potential to contradict Mitchell's thesis. Many of the images presented here use distance (and sometimes also a change of vantage point) as a means of recognizing the mechanisms of seeing, as a starting point for reflection and action. Such is the work of Belgian artist Mishka Henner, analyzed by Alicia Guzman – Henner's photographs expose the scale of the American meat and oil industries and their dire effects on the environment, but also offer the viewer an intriguing aesthetic experience, by creating images simultaneously alluring and unnerving. The representation of rapidly changing natural landscapes becomes an especially pertinent topic in the age of the Anthropocene – examined by Sidsel Nelund in her review of Haus der Kulturen der Welt's *Anthropocene Project* and by Susan Schuppli in the essay *Can the Sun Lie?*. In his essay devoted to representations of war in the works of Sophie Ristelhueber and Werner Herzog, Krzysztof Pijarski asks whether the traditional genre of aerial photography

may hold a subversive potential. However, not all of the presented landscapes are as directly political as the work of Henner, Ristelhueber, Herzog, and the creators of the film *Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change* (examined by Schuppli). Although often naturalized, they often call for political and philosophical questions. And so Łukasz Zaremba writes about the process of radical commercialization of Polish landscapes after 1989 and the recently passed "landscape bill," constructed with the aim of "cleaning up" and "aestheticizing" contemporary urban and suburban views. In the essays by Max Symuleski and Piotr Schollenberger, the distance necessarily involved in the production of images of the Earth from outer space has a profoundly destabilizing effect on the viewer's subjectivity. We also examine the archive of Polish artist Teresa Murak (with Sebastian Cichocki's commentary); as well as the work and thought of Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski, the first proponent of landscape preservation in Poland (in an essay by Mateusz Salwa). Lastly, the photographs of Dutch artist Awoiska van der Molen are analyzed by Ernst van Alphen and the diverse art projects of Francis Alÿs is discussed with the artist in conversation with Magda Szcześniak.

Editorial Team