

# The Environment in the Museum: the Rhetoric of Photographic Landscapes in Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate

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*As concern for ecological sustainability has become a global issue, its visual representation has become prominent in the art museum. Through the study of the current exhibition, Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate, I analyse the role of exhibition design, curatorial practise and photographic meaning, to understand how environmentalism is communicated through the values of documentary truth. By simplifying the meaning of the photographs to their subject matter, and ignoring the important ideological function of aesthetics, authorship and photographic history, I demonstrate how, through the curatorial framework, the photographs in Imaging a Shattering Earth become isolated from their greater rhetorical meanings. Critically situating my paper within the discourse of photographic history, I maintain that landscape photography presents an ideological way of seeing, based on cultural and social values, and that its location in the museum directly impacts the interpretation of the work.*

In 2004, a joint exhibition between CONTACT, the annual contemporary photography festival in Toronto, Ontario and the Meadow Brook Art Gallery/University of Oakland, in Rochester, Michigan, offered a contemporary interpretation on the “man-altered landscape.” The exhibition was conceived as a focal point to the University of Oakland's year long theme of Environmental Explorations in 2004-2005, a cross-humanities project to foster debate and awareness about the cultural, social and scientific conditions which impact the environment from within the academic institution. Curated by Claude Baillargeon, *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate* is positioned in a strongly polemic way. ISE takes a position of protest, as announced in its title, against the continued destruction of the environment and seeks to convince through its images. Shown in several locations across North America since its inception (including the National Gallery of Canada, sponsored by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, from July to October, 2008), the exhibition addresses the many aspects of landscape photography today: its use as a 'truth document', its relationship to photographic history, and its place in the art world. The success of the show, which is ongoing in touring exhibition format, rests on its ability to communicate a strong message of concern for the environment while relying on the traditional conventions of landscape photography.

In this paper, I explore the practice and representation of the human impacted landscapes through the analysis of *Imaging a Shattering Earth* (hereafter ISE). By analysing the curatorial approach of Claude Baillargeon, I establish the current state of social critique in the museum. As concern for ecological sustainability has become a global issue, its visual representation has become prominent in the art institution. The question I ask is: how is the meaning of environmentalism communicated to the viewer of this exhibition through the photographic representation of landscape?

Photographic meaning remains a thorny issue in the study of the medium, complicated by issues of intention, interpretation, and context. In his influential essay, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” Allan Sekula looks at the complicated relationship between art and documentary photography to address the problematic idea of “photographic meaning.” Sekula writes that,

the photograph, as it stands alone presents merely the possibility of meaning [author's emphasis]. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome” (Sekula, 457). The appropriation, as Sekula calls it, of a photograph by any number of rhetorical discourses can generate its own reading just as much as intention on the part of the photographer or art institution. Sekula conceives of photography as a message deeply rooted in its cultural context and connotative meaning. To understand the meaning of a photograph, Sekula asks the question: “what is the original rhetorical function of the photograph?(453).

In this paper, my purpose is to show how the curatorial approach of Claude Baillargeon has rooted photographic meaning in social critique. By embracing an approach to curation in which content and context take a more important role than connoisseurship

and aesthetics, Baillargeon has reduced the exhibition and the works within to a didactic and educational reading. By simplifying the meaning of the photographs to their subject matter, and ignoring the important ideological function of aesthetics, the works in ISE become isolated from their greater rhetorical meanings.

ISE brings together twelve photographers working with the landscape: Edward Burtynsky, John Ganis, Peter Goin, Emmet Gowin, David T. Hanson, Johnathan Long, David Maisel, David McMillan, Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, John Pfahl, and Mark Ruwedel. Many of these photographers, including Burtynsky, Ganis, Goin, Gowin, Hanson, McMillan, Pfahl, and Ruwedel, have been working with the landscape for decades. Others, such as Maisel and the ParkeHarrisons are in mid-career, while Johnathan Long is only just emerging as a landscape photographer. All are working with the same subject, the man-altered landscape, but strategies and approaches vary in a way that reduces the visual and formal cohesion of the exhibition. Baillargeon has written that “collectively, they argue for the necessity of concerted actions against the progressive shattering of the earth” (Baillargeon 25). The uniting force of the exhibition is its conceptual framework, constructed by the curator, in which the context of each photograph is emphasized to unite the numerous technical and visual differences amongst the works.

When exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada in 2008, under the aegis of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the photographs were displayed in such a way as to create coherence amongst a disparate group of works. Framing, lay-out and textual support were designed to create an overarching connection between the content and the installation concept. On first entering the gallery, the viewer was presented with a main room, where each wall was devoted to a single photographer. This pattern continued into the next room, which was divided in two, creating a more intimate space for the smaller works. Beginning in the main room, the viewer was presented with photographs by Burtynsky, Maisel and the ParkeHarrisons: arguably the most visually arresting and unusual works in the exhibition in terms of scale (the images by Burtynsky and Maisel both measured over four feet in length) as well as technical approach (in the case of the ParkeHarrisons their use of the photogravure printing process is unique in the exhibition). Each photographer's work, whether represented by only three images, as was the case for Maisel, or ten, for Emmet Gowin, had its own framing system; colour coordinated frames to unite the individual images of each photographer and to create a larger pattern of display to the exhibition. At the beginning of each photographer's work, there was a large wall panel introducing them to the audience and describing their history of photo-making, from within the context of the “environmental debate.” From large to small, colour to toned gelatin silver, the photographs in ISE are exhibited in a manner that attempts to overcome the great formal and technical differences amongst the works, by privileging their subject matter to the greater benefit of the exhibition concept.

In the exhibition, Baillargeon has deliberately brought together a number of photographers whose works demonstrate formal and technical differences. Baillargeon has explained away this difference by writing that: “ranging in scale from diminutive to colossal, each print exemplifies its maker's reliance upon a synthetic, outward-looking

vision. Yet for all the remoteness of their imaging strategies, these works aim to engage viewers in a collective process of soul-searching” (Baillargeon 26). Baillargeon attempts to connect the photographers in the exhibition, who come from different generations and points in their careers, and who employ many different techniques of photography, by calling on the language of the artist as oracle, an understanding of artists as truth-seekers for the larger culture. Words like “vision” and “soul-searching” place these photographers in an elevated position, one which gives them the voice to speak for the world in a universalizing manner, rather than the subjective voice that most artists and photographers today acknowledge. Baillargeon gives the photographers involved the status of keepers of a collective vision without addressing the differences of approach amongst the photographers, or the subjective nature of photography itself.

Another way that Baillargeon addresses his choice to include such vastly different approaches to the photographic landscape is by structuring the exhibition into what he calls “three recurring preoccupations” (Baillargeon 27), which are explained in the catalogue and mounted on the wall of the gallery. The first is the scarring of the surface by human activities referred to as “The Marks We Make,” which could aptly describe the works in the show by David Maisal and Emmit Gowin, works that utilize the abstract qualities of landscape. The second category is “Resource Industries,” described by Baillargeon as “the exploitation and management of natural resources,” represented by John Pfahl’s romantic smoke stack images. The third, entitled “Exclusion Zones,” refers to the state of sites so damaged by ecological disaster that they are uninhabitable, as seen in the works of David McMillan, who has for many years documented the abandoned nuclear site of Chernobyl as it degrades (Baillargeon 27-31). Baillargeon’s use of didactic categories to focus the viewer’s understanding comes across as artificial, as the subtlety of meaning in each photograph is subsumed below an overarching thematic convention which articulates only the focus of “environmental debate.”

On the surface, this exhibition asks the viewer to look at images of the environment at their most denotative level, as representations of pollution, irreversible and tragic. In choosing to ignore the issues of aesthetics, of subjectivity, and the camera’s gaze, Baillargeon reinforces the presentation of these works as ‘truth’ documents that are more about the subject addressed than about the artistry involved in their creation. More like a photo essay, or coffee table book published by the Sierra Club, Baillargeon’s exhibition seeks to convince, to persuade with facts rather than artistic fiction. In his book *Natural Visions*, about the role of photography in the twentieth century American environmental movement, Finis Dunaway points to a similar strategy amongst environmental photographers of the past. Dunaway writes that,

... even as they celebrated the power of the camera, they did not assume that images could speak for themselves. Instead of displaying pictures in isolation, where they could evoke many possible meanings, artists and activists paired images with texts to lead viewers to particular interpretations” (Dunaway, xviii).

The role of supporting text to convince and to support an ideological position connects the exhibition to the tradition of photographic reform. By relying on the strategies of

earlier environmental photography to appeal to its audience, through the combined influence of words and images, Baillargeon prevents the photographs from speaking for themselves, or allowing the viewer to find their own interpretation.

Baillargeon references the tradition of the environmental reform movement in the catalogue and throughout the exhibition in his use of environmental rhetoric and the positioning of the photographs and photographers within the larger history of social reform. Baillargeon is at great pains to present the works in the show as “a rallying cry against the ecological degradation of our world” (Baillargeon 26). ISE attempts to use the photographs in the exhibition as examples of artful activism bringing them in line with the social documentary tradition of Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, and especially W. Eugene and Aileen Smith, who, in the 1970's, documented the terrible effects of toxic waste on the people of Minamata, Japan and to whom the catalogue is dedicated (27). Baillargeon connects the exhibition to the environmental reform movement by referencing past tragedies and the emotional response these narratives produce.

When studying the powerful impact of environmental reform photography, Finis Dunaway emphasizes that environmentalism is equally about emotions as it is about facts. Photographers, and their supporters, attempted to win both the hearts and minds of their viewers through the power of the image. As Dunaway writes,

... investing great hopes in the camera, they [environmental photographers] believed that this machine could express their feelings to a mass audience. They encouraged spectators to feel awe-inspired not in the presence of actual landscapes but in response to visual images (Dunaway xix).

Here, Dunaway is writing specifically of photographers, such as Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter, who produced images of nature largely untouched by human development. Yet their intention to use visual culture and its emotional response as a way to convey social and political meaning is central to Baillargeon's approach. At the same time that Baillargeon exhibits these works within the gallery setting, elevating them to the status of high art, he attempts to connect the photographs to a larger tradition of documentary photography and to use the techniques of the social reform movement to convince viewers of the importance of environmentalism today.

This documentary understanding of the ISE photographs is made apparent throughout the exhibition by Baillargeon's use of didactic panels and curatorial support materials, including a reference library on environmental disaster and climate change at the entrance to the exhibit, which present the works in question as first and foremost social documents. Each photographer in the exhibit is represented by a large panel explaining their history of photo-making, and the details which accompany any exhibition of photographs: age of photographer, hometown, location of shoot. But instead of describing their work in the larger context of photographic and art history, Baillargeon chooses to instead describe the work of each photographer from within their personal history of environmentalism. Written by Katy McCormick, as reproduced in the catalogue, these didactic panels describe the photographers through their activism, their subjects, and the political and social implications of their works. At no point is aesthetics

discussed beyond its role in creating debate around the issues of environmentalism. In response to the discussion of beauty in an image by Emmet Gowin, McCormick writes, “this question could be posed with any number of the artists in *Imaging a Shattering Earth*; whatever the response, one cannot ignore a thing of beauty, and when that thing points at something else, then that too must be acknowledged” (Baillargeon 69-70). This response typifies the role of beauty and aesthetics in the exhibition. Reduced to only a referent that points back again to the social and political criticism in the photographs, aesthetics are accepted as a tool with which to reach the viewer without questioning their greater ideological function in the meaning of photography.

In part, Baillargeon owes a strong debt to the criticism of photographic theorists and historians who became prominent in the late 1970's and 1980's for their institutional critique of modernism and the modernist emphasis of aesthetics above content in the museum. In their recent book, *The Meaning of Photography*, Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson outline the importance of what has been termed “the October moment,” a period of re-evaluation in the humanities and social sciences, and art history most importantly, brought about by the influential journal of the same name, which culminated in 1989 with the collection *The Contest of Meaning*, edited by Richard Bolton (Kelsey & Stimson ix). They write that, “the essays Bolton assembled, like the broader critical turn they represent for us, rejected the fashioning of a discrete history for photography and turned instead to studying its ideological functions and semiotic machinations in the world at large” (ix). The importance of this critical approach was to make viewers question the underlying ideological implications of aesthetics and the role of the museum in creating a universalizing history of photography. This turn towards the ideological functions of photography in the larger world can be seen in Baillargeon's attempt to emphasize the collective social signification of the work in ISE. Baillargeon attempts to draw new purpose for photography, and its viewers, in what Kelsey and Stimson refer to as the re-evaluation of a global “sense of accountability for both the images we consume and the world they represent” (xxiii). Unfortunately, Baillargeon's attempt to establish an higher critical purpose for photography, in keeping with the larger turn in photographic scholarship, takes the ideological turn too far by ignoring the importance of aesthetics, and the subjectivity of the image maker. By doing so, Baillargeon only perpetuates the pattern of universalizing one interpretation over another, the very reason behind the need for institutional critique in the first place, and calls in to question the same sense of accountability that Baillargeon seeks to establish for the medium.

### *Contemporary Photography in the Environmental Debate*

In keeping with the changes that have occurred in photography in recent years, especially the technological advances of cameras and printing processes, not to mention the rediscovery of early techniques and methods, the photographs in ISE reflect the exploration of today's photographic practices. From Mark Ruwedel's large format photographs to the ParkeHarrisons' explorations of the historical photogravure method to the 360 degree panorama shooting of Johnathan Long, the images in ISE reflect the

multiple techniques and ways of approaching photography today. These various techniques reflect the post-modern evaluation of photography as conceptual and self-reflective, as about the history of photography as well as the subject represented.

Mark Ruwedel, in his series the Handford Stretch, Colombia River (1992-1993) recreates the expedition quality of nineteenth century geographical photography by canoeing the Colombia river with a large format camera, documenting an area seemingly untouched by human development. Printed in black and white, The Handford Stretch series presents a landscape that appears largely untouched by human development, except for the occasional inclusion of the expedition members and a series of electrical lines that run across the horizon in all the images, connecting the photographs to one another. In the photographic diptych, "Handford Town Site/A Nez Percé Meeting Place," (1992-93) the soft tones of the gelatin silver print process renders the landscape a soft light-filled expanse of texture and organic details, marred only by the site of two far away electrical towers. The landscape begins at the centre of a dried river bed of smooth pebbles and continues out across the rippling water to show the viewer the two opposing river banks. Compositionally, the diptych is sophisticated, capturing the undulating shapes of rock, water and far off hilly banks, while centred on the hazy horizon beyond the tallest tower. To emphasize their debt to nineteenth century photographs and the documentary style, Ruwedel's prints are framed and titled in hand-written pencil lettering to recreate the feel of early photographic display. The Handford Stretch series maintains the neutral style of modernist photography, whether referencing the photographic work of Timothy O'Sullivan or Robert Adams, most likely both. It is only by reading the accompanying panel that the viewer learns that the Handford Stretch is considered one of the most toxic sites in the U.S., polluted by long term plutonium production.

The post-modern exploration of photographic history is especially present in the work of Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison. Their images are the most distinct in the exhibition for their use of constructed imagery, performance, and the digital techniques of photoshop, combined with the historic printing method of photogravure. Made through a process of transferring a negative image to a sensitized copper plate that is then printed in the manner of intaglio printing, photogravure is little used today. The history of photogravure is linked to both the early reproduction of photographs in books and the Pictorialist movement. The photogravure technique was embraced by proponents of art photography for its soft focus and subtle tonality. Photographers such as Peter Henry Emerson, in his development of a theory of Naturalistic Photography, thought the blurred and impressionistic quality of photogravure most similar to the way the eye sees (Nickel 62, 64). Alfred Stieglitz, the influential photographer and founder of the Pictorialist movement in the United States, used hand-pulled photogravures to promote his aestheticized vision for art photography through the publication of his magazine *Camera Work*. The ParkeHarrisons use of the photogravure technique demonstrates an attempt to move beyond the fallacy of photographic truth and to discourse with the romanticism of an earlier age.

The ParkeHarrison's unique imagery reflects surrealist influences and fantasy elements that articulate a dystopian response to the environment. In *Reclamation* (2003), a central figure looks away from the viewer towards another figure, distant under a dominating cloud-filled sky. Their backs to the viewer, both dressed in a suit and tie, the two figures attempt to pull a massive field carpet of grass over the denuded earth upon which they stand. In *Burn Season*, the figure in suit and tie, the white-collared every-man (performed in this series of images by Robert ParkeHarrison) walks across a burned out field towards a perfect straight line of fire, smoke rising above it to render the sky imperceptible through the smoke, his only defence a cascade of water-filled plastic bags strung over his body, shaped like tears. The soft and subtle tonality of the black and white photogravure process, adds to the dream-like quality of these images, making them at odds with the rest of the work in the show.

Baillargeon's own words explain his choice to include the unique work of the ParkeHarrisons. He describes the photographs of the couple, embodied by their 'every-man' figure as "a metaphorical surrogate for all the photographers in the exhibition, who are committed to exposing the uncertain future of our ecological universe" (Baillargeon 28), Baillargeon gives the photographs of the ParkeHarrisons a larger importance in the show than any of the others' by elevating their images to the status of emissaries of social reform. While this decision on the part of the curator is at odds with the larger framing of the exhibition as documentary and factual, it is much in keeping with the social reform movements desire to draw on emotions as a tool of persuasion. Baillargeon's choice to include the ParkeHarrison's in the exhibition can also be understood as an attempt to both reflect the complicated state of photography today, by referencing the photo-historical debate on the place of photography in art, and by adding more traditional artistry to the exhibit.

What is most apparent when viewing the works in ISE (with the exception of the photography of Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison) is the reliance on the part of its photographers on formalist neutrality. Baillargeon, in his attempt to bring context and content to the forefront of the ISE exhibition uses the aesthetic neutrality of these images not to render meaning impartial but to present the images as a form of documentary truth. In her recent survey of contemporary photography, Charlotte Cotton refers to this stylistic neutrality as "deadpan aesthetic" (Cotton 81). She points out that this aesthetic style became especially popular as a way to represent landscape and architectural subject matter and as a way to carefully raise social and political issues. Cotton writes:

Polemical narratives are raised for the viewer, but it appears as if this information is being given impartially. Deadpan photography often acts in this fact-stating mode: the personal politics of the photographers come into play in their selection of subject matter and their anticipation of the viewer's analysis of it, not in any explicit political statement through text or photographic style (87-88).

The photographs of Johnathan Long exemplify the "dead-pan aesthetic" in ISE. Shot from a vantage point that is at eye level, Long's panoramic works, are literally 360 degrees around but presented as a single image. Scientific in detail and method,



physically composited of many different negatives, Long's images document the damage brought about by human activity and resource extraction. *Broken Trees*, from 2002, is perfectly composed, with the sky balanced above the far distance green trees while a bog of broken trees reflects the orange hues of mining by-product residue in the foreground. The vast scale of the image renders the landscape destruction all encompassing while the balance of colours and shapes are harmonious. The length of the horizon is broken by sharp vertical tree stumps that make the image more dynamic. Long's photography reflects the traditional viewing of landscape as without artifice, represented as a truthful document, while his process reflects the understanding of photography as a mechanical eye. So seemingly objective, the landscape appears to the viewer as perfectly natural, without questioning the choices that were made by the photographer to achieve these results. Long's "personal politics" are communicated by his choice to use such a technically exact method of photographing and through his choice to compose the image in such a careful and controlled way. The artifice of the "dead-pan aesthetic" renders the image both aesthetically and conceptually neutral, waiting for the interpretation of greater meaning. In the case of ISE, this greater meaning is brought about by the presentation of these works in the museum and under the banner of environmentalism.

### *Landscape, Nature and Environmentalism*

Environmentalism is both a social movement, in which people act together to protest political decisions which effect the planet, and an ideology, which proposes that the interrelatedness of humanity and nature is fundamental to a moral and ethical philosophy of individuals. Today, with the concept of climate change largely accepted as reality, these issues are prominent in everyday culture through the news, television, film as well as in scientific and artistic forums. The philosopher Arnold Berleant sees the response of the public, to the ethical and philosophical questions raised by pollution, the consumption of resources, and climate change, as driven by the personal response to the idea of environment ("Living in the Landscape," 1). He writes that, "a growing awareness of the fragility of environment and the loss of cherished landscapes has awakened many people to the transcendent values of nature" ("Living in the Landscape," 2).

The value of nature, or environment, or landscape, rests in its importance as an irreplaceable commodity that is not quantifiable but is integral to individual human existence and quality of life. W.J.T. Mitchell has written that,

... as a medium for expressing value, it [landscape] has a semiotic structure rather like money, functioning as a special sort of commodity that plays a unique symbolic role in the system of exchange-value. Like money, landscape is good for nothing as a use-value, while serving as a theoretically limitless symbol of value at some other level (Mitchell, 14).

This value, which grows with the understanding that there is a limit to the environment, that is it not continuously renewable, plays a role not only in our philosophical, moral, and social systems but also in our economic system. As pictured in the photographs of ISE, environment also represents a literal commodity which our economic system relies on for growth. Just as humans can be understood as a commodity, embodied in a work

force that functions to create wealth through production of goods in our capitalist system, the environment is a great source of wealth. The 'resources' of the environment has a two-fold meaning, it is the foundation of our commodity system and it functions as an idea, a "symbolic value" that represents for humanity the health and prosperity of all.

One of the ways that this exhibition has declared its allegiance to the environmental movement is by the inclusion of an essay by the prominent environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. In his essay, originally published in *Vogues Hommes International* (fall/winter 2004/05), Kennedy writes, "I do not believe that we should preserve nature for nature's sake. We must preserve nature because it is the infrastructure of our communities. When we destroy nature, we destroy the basis of our economy" (Kennedy 8). In making this statement, Kennedy is directly addressing the "man-altered landscapes" in these images, representations of the resource based economic system that today is global in scope. Rather than argue that nature deserves to be preserved for its own intrinsic values, such beauty, spirit, or aesthetic experience, as was promoted by the early environmentalists Henry David Thoreau and John Muir who saw the untouched wilderness as intrinsically beautiful and human intervention on the landscape as ugly (Carlson 1), Kennedy appeals directly to the reality of our economic and environmental situation today. In an attempt to balance the importance of nature versus economy, Kennedy argues that both are intrinsically tied to one another. Positioning environmentalists as the ultimate pragmatists, who appreciate that "we cannot treat the planet as if it were a business in liquidation, squandering the birthright of all future generations," Kennedy uses the languages of investment banking to appeal to a larger audience when he writes: "we must stop invading our principal and learn to live off its abundant interest" (Kennedy 9). This perspective on the environment is not politically radical or controversial. Kennedy presents the environment as a renewable economic resource that needs to be protected so that it can be continually drawn upon for the benefit of humankind. In this conservative understanding of environment, Kennedy attempts to appeal to the unconvinced by relying on their desire to maintain the status quo. Baillargeon's choice to include the writings of Kennedy, a prominent environmentalist and speaker, supports his focus on the social meaning of photography and the beneficial relationship of words and images. Kennedy's emphasis on the value of environment is at the heart of the ISE exhibition, which attempts to use the value of art to convince viewers of the need for environmental protection and to privilege landscapes that are seen as less than beautiful.

The photographers included in ISE are part of a larger movement of people who act as witnesses to the pollution and destruction of places, habitats, and communities through the acts of industry and human development. Yet, they are first and foremost artists who use the conventions of photography to create impactful images, even when their subject matter is less than desirable. Relying on techniques new and old, and formal compositional conventions that have come down from the tradition of landscape art and modern photography, the photographers of ISE depict 'the environment', the spaces outside of us that we worry about and seek to protect. The photographs are of environments which do not conform to a traditional way of understanding nature. In

understanding how the photographs in ISE work to challenge traditional values about environment and beauty it is useful to look at again at environmental aesthetics. Berleant writes:

In the West it is only since the eighteenth century that landscape has been recognized as having significant aesthetic value. Since then there has been a gradual process of recognizing and preserving scenic views and areas whose importance lies apart from any industrial or commercial value they might possess (“Art, Environment and the Shaping of Experience,” 9- 10).

Berleant equates this historical understanding of environment, which privileged the aesthetic value of parks and landscapes above other criteria, with the traditional attitude towards art. Just like objects, which were once isolated in museums and placed apart based on their aesthetic values, environments were understood by Western culture as valuable for their aesthetic other-ness, separate from the physical space of human beings, rather than understood as part of everyday existence (“Art, Environment and the Shaping of Experience, 10). The photographs in ISE bring to the museum images of environment that have been primarily ignored and introduce an aesthetic appreciation for these places through the techniques of photography. The function of these photographs is both to expose the viewer to an alternate environment from the one humans regularly see and to challenge the understanding of environment as legitimate only through the privileging of pristine wilderness.

Berleant argues in defence of environments that are under-appreciated, such as the “man-altered” landscape, by re-defining the definition of what constitutes environmental appreciation and explaining the value of these places. He writes:

The aesthetics of environment must also recognize landscapes that damage us in various ways: by destroying the identity of place and our affection for places, by disrupting architectural coherence, by imposing sounds and smells that may injure as well as repel, or by making our living environment hostile and even uninhabitable from air, water or noise pollution. Part of their criticism is aesthetic: an offence to our perceptual sensibilities and an immediate encounter with negative value. The significance of environmental appreciation thus becomes greater at the same time as its scope increases. No longer confined to the safe precincts of gardens and parks, the boundaries of the aesthetic must be redefined to encompass all of nature, city as well as countryside, factory as well as museum, desert wastes and urban wastelands as well as mountain-rimmed fjords (“Art, Environment and the Shaping of Experience”, 13).

This understanding of environment attempts to create a broader context for the appreciation of landscape and culture, and the forces which act on each, from within the broadened definition of environmental aesthetics.

Berleant's call to re-evaluate the definition and understanding of environment seems particularly relevant when considering the work of the photographers in ISE, who attempt to bring consideration to landscapes that are largely overlooked by employing the conventions of photography. It is unfortunate that Baillargeon's curatorial approach

largely ignores the discussion of aesthetics, and of what constitutes beauty, a much needed discussion if we, as a culture, are to reconcile the ever changing state of the environment with our expectations for the future. The exhibition ISE, and the photographs therein, demonstrate how the changing understandings of landscape and environment, not to mention aesthetics, must be interrogated, especially if the cultural understanding of current environmental transformations are to be reconciled with our expectations of nature. As well, the exhibition itself, rife with its own ideological and cultural messages must be interrogated by us, the viewers, to determine the institutional meanings of viewing environmentalism in the museum.

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