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Waste and the Sublime Landscape

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Article abstract

Les impératifs écologiques ont joué un rôle de plus en plus important dans la production de l'art contemporain. Mais, si l'on fait souvent remonter l'« éco-art » au mouvement du land art des années 1960, de nombreux artistes contemporains se sont tournés vers les traditions paysagères du dix-huitième et du dix-neuvième siècle qui représentent pour eux une source d'inspiration esthétique et de réflexion éthique. Cet article se penche sur le renouveau de l'esthétique du sublime dans l'oeuvre de deux artistes canadiens contemporains, le photographe Edward Burtynsky et le sculpteur et auteur d'installations Jérôme Fortin. Ils utilisent des médias différents, mais leurs oeuvres se correspondent à double titre. D'abord, leurs pratiques se fondent sur l'usage de résidus industriels, en particulier le métal et le plastique. Ensuite, tous deux esthétisent le déchet en le présentant dans le vocabulaire visuel du paysage sublime. Leurs paysages sublimes élaborés à partir de déchets industriels soulèvent des enjeux cruciaux à propos de la relation entre l'humain et la terre. Loin de vouloir insuffler carrément un renouveau historique du sublime, ces artistes interrogent la structure de l'expérience du sublime avec l'idée de dévoiler ses implications écologiques. Cet article entend démontrer à quel point, dans l'oeuvre de Burtynsky et Fortin, le paysage sublime se fonde sur un effaçage de la terre dans lequel la présence naturelle est évacuée des paramètres de la représentation. De sorte que l'ampleur, la quantité et le caractère menaçant des déchets humains en viennent à remplacer la nature comme mécanisme de l'expérience du sublime.

Waste and the Sublime Landscape

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Résumé

Les impératifs écologiques ont joué un rôle de plus en plus important dans la production de l'art contemporain. Mais, si l'on fait souvent remonter l'« éco-art » au mouvement du land art des années 1960, de nombreux artistes contemporains se sont tournés vers les traditions paysagères du dix-huitième et du dix-neuvième siècle qui représentent pour eux une source d'inspiration esthétique et de réflexion éthique. Cet article se penche sur le renouveau de l'esthétique du sublime dans l'oeuvre de deux artistes canadiens contemporains, le photographe Edward Burtynsky et le sculpteur et auteur d'installations Jérôme Fortin. Ils utilisent des médias différents, mais leurs oeuvres se correspondent à double titre. D'abord, leurs pratiques se fondent sur l'usage de résidus industriels, en particulier le métal et le plastique. Ensuite, tous deux esthétisent le déchet en le présentant dans le vocabulaire visuel du paysage sublime. Leurs paysages sublimes élaborés à partir de déchets industriels soulèvent des enjeux cruciaux à propos de la relation entre l'humain et la terre. Loin de vouloir insuffler carrément un renouveau historique du sublime, ces artistes interrogent la structure de l'expérience du sublime avec l'idée de dévoiler ses implications écologiques. Cet article entend démontrer à quel point, dans l'oeuvre de Burtynsky et Fortin, le paysage sublime se fonde sur un effaçage de la terre dans lequel la présence naturelle est évacuée des paramètres de la représentation. De sorte que l'ampleur, la quantité et le caractère menaçant des déchets humains en viennent à remplacer la nature comme mécanisme de l'expérience du sublime.

Landscape and the Representation of Nature

In recent scholarship, the discourse of landscape has tended to lead away from questions about nature as such and towards questions of representation. Certainly, the tradition of landscape painting in the West has frequently been engaged in romanticized portrayals of untouched natural environments. What has been at stake in the interpretation of landscape imagery, then, is the question of what values drive the construction of an idealized form of nature, be it a pristine territory or a sublime wilderness. Often the conclusion is that what we understand nature to be is itself an ideal: there is no natural place that is not mediated by humans, and no landscape that is not tied to our valuation and representation of it. Thus, in his introduction to the collected book of essays *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell posits that landscape is "both a represented and a presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what the frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package."[1] But does this necessarily mean that there is no nature beyond our representation of it? Is it true that, in the words of the American earthworks artist Robert Smithson, "Nature is simply another 18th and 19th century fiction"[2]?

From an ecological perspective, it is important to consider not only how nature is constructed and represented, but also how nature exceeds our systems of representation. While it may seem that the appropriate response to environmental crisis is to leave nature alone (a response that quickly slides back into the ideal of virginal nature), we might instead consider the need to reconceptualize our contact with nature by remaining attentive to the limits of our grasp of it, thereby opening a space for it to exist on its own terms. In this respect, it behooves us to investigate the aesthetic tradition that best expresses the dilemmas at play when confronting nature at these points of excess. Specifically, the tradition of the sublime articulates a tension between a sense of being overwhelmed by nature on the one hand, and an equally potent drive to contain it on the other. In the eighteenth century, the theorization of the sublime experience was underwritten with an assertion of the primacy of reason over nature, a procedure that required the subject's transcendence over the sensorial experience of the external world. The revival of the sublime landscape in contemporary art invites a reconsideration of these terms of engagement. For the contemporary artists Edward Burtynsky and Jérôme Fortin, the aesthetic of the sublime holds within it a way to recover contact with nature, not as an ideal but as an ungraspable force that presents itself at the edges of human territory, and specifically at sites of waste accumulation. Both artists mediate the viewer's contact with nature through a screen of garbage.

Edward Burtynsky has become well known for his photographs of toxic waste in the Canadian landscape, as well as images of industrial areas, such as marble quarries, ship-breaking sites in Bangladesh, and recently, in his *China Recycling* series (2004, figs. 3, 5), recycling plants in China where machines and plastic toys are dismantled. This series is striking for the way it documents mountains of mechanical and electronic detritus and refigures them into unsettling, yet visually compelling topographies. In a similar vein, Montreal-based artist Jérôme Fortin constructs sculptural landscapes out of industrial discard. Known for his installations in which he transforms old metal, plastic, and wire into everything from a miniature city (*New York, New York*, 1996–2005, fig. 1) to faux cabinets of curiosity, Fortin's practice calls us to consider the aesthetic potential of waste. Most pertinent to this exploration of the sublime is his *Seascapes* series (2001–03, fig. 7), a set of pictorial tableaux that look like rippling waves but which

Figure 1. Jérôme Fortin, *New York, New York*, 1996–2005. Mixed media. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Richard-Max Tremblay.

are actually made from strips of cut plastic bottles, a jarringly permanent material.

By constructing sublime landscapes out of trash, Burtynsky and Fortin raise crucial issues about the representation of the human-earth relation. They do not attempt a straightforward revival of the nineteenth-century sublime. Rather, they interrogate the structure of the sublime experience with a view to uncovering its ecological implications. In what follows, I will discuss how, through their production of landscapes that are not only littered with garbage but are actually shaped by it, Burtynsky and Fortin problematize the traditional theorization of the sublime as an aesthetic in which the subject overcomes the sensorial experience of nature. The artworks raise the question, how do sites of garbage accumulation relate to the mode of aesthetic experience that the sublime entails? The screens of trash that appear in Burtynsky's and Fortin's works identify the limit of the viewer's perceptual and conceptual grasp of nature. In this way, the landscape of waste articulates the point at which human supremacy over the earth ends and a new contact with it might begin.

Dispersing and Evacuating Nature: The Sublime Tradition

Before turning to Burtynsky and Fortin, it is worthwhile to historicize the construction of the sublime experience. It was first theorized in its modern form by Edmund Burke, who understood it as a feeling of astonishment triggered by a drive for self-

preservation in the face of nature. Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, published in 1757, elaborates what many associate with the experience of the sublime: the combined feeling of terror and delight upon confronting powerful and threatening forces of nature. Two points in Burke's aesthetic treatise are worth highlighting: first, the sublime experience overwhelms both the mind and the body, and second, its cause is something in external nature that raises the possibility of death. Burke begins part two of the *Enquiry* with the statement that the strongest passion caused by the great and sublime in nature is astonishment, a state of the soul in which "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it."[3] By tracing the etymology of the word "astonishment," Burke insists on its double meaning, as a sentiment that encompasses both terror and respect. Interestingly, Burke also maintains that, because it immobilizes and floods the mind, the terror evoked by the sublime object is akin to the experience of physical pain. Pain is always inflicted by a superior power; it is not something to which we willingly submit.[4] Similarly, the sublime object fills the mind with terror because it possesses the superior power to cause pain or death. Terror and pain have their origins in the mind and the body respectively, but produce a similar condition. Burke explains:

> The only difference between pain and terror, is, that things which cause pain operate on the mind, by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting danger; but both agreeing, either primarily, or secondarily, in producing a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves, they agree likewise in everything else.[5]

In this way, the sublime is a condition in which nature not only evokes terror but also awakens the body to instincts of self-preservation.

In what way, then, can delight be coupled with terror in the sublime experience? Delight, it should be noted, is not a masochistic pleasure taken from the threat of pain that the sublime poses. Rather, it is a kind of satisfaction taken from the exertion of the mind as it grapples with an enigmatic idea such as mortality. But this can only occur if one does not actually experience the violence that the sublime object threatens to impose. Only when the burden of physical pain and threat of self-destruction is lifted does one experience "a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror."[6] The "troublesome encumbrance" of real danger must be removed in order for terror to give way to a sense of awe, reverence, and respect, the particular kinds of delight that inform the sublime experience. Burke characterizes these delights as a kind of mental exercise; in the same way that physical labour—the contraction and striving of the body—can be the remedy for melancholy, dejection, and despair, so also does the sublime awaken the senses and cause the mental faculties to stretch.[7]

It follows from the complementary passions of terror, which overtakes the mind, and respect, which challenges its limits, that the sublime in nature is not easily defined as any particular object or creature. That is to say, in Burke's writing, though the sublime feeling always seems to have a cause in nature, nature itself remains highly ambiguous.[8] In his discussion of the beautiful, Burke considers how and why exotic birds, flowers, animals, and the human body can be considered aesthetically as beautiful objects, but when he turns to the sublime, nature itself is more of a quality about the external world that resists the mind's reach. Certainly, Burke mentions serpents and poisonous animals as examples of things that, because they are objects of terror, are capable of eliciting the sublime.[9] Yet, it is not so much the animal itself that is sublime, but the idea that it evokes. This is perhaps why, more than any animal, and even more than a vast landscape (so often the subject of sublime paintings in the nineteenth century), it is the idea of the ocean that Burke finds the most appropriate example of the sublime:

> A level plain of a vast extent on land is certainly no mean idea; the prospect of such a plain may be as extensive as a prospect of the ocean; but can it ever fill the mind with any thing so great as the ocean itself? This is owing to several causes, but it is owing to none more than this, that the ocean is an object of no small terror.[10]

Indeed, when Burke shifts his discussion from the beautiful to the sublime, he turns his attention to nebulous manifestations of nature that disorient the subject: obscurity, darkness, vacuity, silence, vastness, infinity, magnitude, and suddenness (that is, a sudden beginning or sensation of sound). Most significantly, all of these manifestations resist the senses and the mind: darkness and obscurity, for example, obfuscate sight, and consequently, the mind is incapable of mastering its surroundings.[11]

The sublime for Burke, then, is a condition in which nature is dispersed into atmospherics that either veil or assault the senses and thus deprive the mind of clarity. It is precisely because there is no definite object but only a disruptive sensorial experience that "the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation."[12] As nature becomes an unpredictable condition under which the world is experienced, so does the sublime become more firmly located within the subject, and, more precisely, in the ideas that arise when nature assails the body with sensorial duress. In triggering a drive for self-preservation, these sensorial obstacles jar the mind out of complacency. Though one cannot fathom sublime nature, it nevertheless challenges the limits of the mental faculties.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, originally published in 1790, Immanuel Kant further develops this subtle shift from the methodical consideration of natural things to an aesthetic experience that occurs within the subject. Where for Burke the amorphous and disruptive qualities of nature bring about the contemplation of mortality, and concurrently the drive for self-preservation, for Kant the perceptual circuitry with external nature is jettisoned, and with it the central part that nature plays in evoking terror and respect. Physical pleasure and pain are contingent responses that cannot be universally valid and therefore violate the conditions for which an *a priori* aesthetic judgment can take place.[13] Reason, however, affords the ability to make an aesthetic judgment based on *a priori* principles, leading Kant to conclude that "the sublime is…the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of mind surpassing every standard of sense."[14]

In the "Analytic of the Sublime," part two of *Critique of Judgment*, the natural world is not sublime in itself, nor is it the stimulus of a phenomenological experience of sublimity in the way that Burke describes. This is not to say that Kant does not consider nature at all; he does so at length. But nature is displaced and taken to be a representation dramatized by the interplay between the faculty of the imagination and the faculty of reason. He states, "We must seek a ground external to ourselves for the beautiful of nature, but seek it for the sublime merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought, which introduces sublimity into the representation of nature."[15] No longer is nature, either as object or as dispersed phenomena, the basis of the sublime. Instead of evoking astonishment, nature is only important insofar as its vastness in relation to the individual *parallels* the interplay between the absolute magnitude of reason and the limits of the imagination. The sublime in nature is in actual fact a representation by the imagination analogous to the boundlessness of reason. Thus, Kant specifies that nature is sublime "in those of its phenomena whose intuition brings with it the idea of its [the mind's] infinity."[16]

Here, nature is the host that carries the thought of the limitlessness of reason. Its magnitude, specificity, and enigmatic qualities that resist perception in Burke's *Enquiry* all become characteristics of reason through subreption, the process by which nature is endowed with qualities actually belonging to the mind. Subreption repositions nature from the external world that we sense, to a representation that approximates the infinitude of reason. As Kant explains, "Therefore the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own destination, which, by a certain subreption, we attribute to an object of nature (conversion of respect for the idea of humanity in our own subject into respect for the object)."[17]

It is important to stress that even the process of subreption does not quite capture the absolute magnitude of reason, since this faculty is fundamentally without limits. Herein lie the feelings of pain and pleasure that signal the sublime experience. There is a discrepancy between what we comprehend via the imagination (i.e., the representation of sublime nature) and the infinite potential for apprehension via reason. Not unlike Burke, Kant describes the pain of the sublime as a kind of mental labour, but in this case it is the labour of the imagination that extends itself, striving to accord with the infinite capacity of reason. Though it strives, however, it always reaches a limit that reason surpasses. Yet the contrast between the limits of the imagination and the limitlessness of reason incites pleasure. Despite its inadequacy, the imagination vainly attempts to reveal the infinitude of reason. Thus, through the contrast between the imagination and reason we possess the ability to estimate "magnitude, whose superiority can be made intuitively evident only by the inadequacy of that faculty [imagination]."[18]

It would appear that the question of nature, and the position of the subject in relation to it, has been rearranged into a purely internal confrontation between the imagination and reason. Further, the "Analytic of the Sublime" returns to the theme of self-preservation. Like Burke, Kant suggests that any real threat coming from nature disrupts the conditions for aesthetic judgment. Unless the immediate safety of the subject is guaranteed, the grandeur of nature cannot be the source of the sublime feeling:

> Now, in the immensity of nature and in the insufficiency of our faculties to take in a standard proportionate to the aesthetical estimation of the magnitude of its *realm*, we find our own limitation, although at the same time in our rational faculty we find a different, nonsensuous standard, which has that infinity itself under it as a unity, in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and thus in our mind we find a superiority to nature even in its immensity. And so also the irresistibility of its might, while making us recognize our own [physical] impotence, considered as beings of nature, discloses to us a faculty of judging independently of and a superiority over nature, on which is based a kind of self-preservation entirely different from that which can be attacked and brought into danger by external nature.[19]

Kant acknowledges the persistence of individual sensations of nature; however, any possible threat they may signal is neutralized through recognition of the superiority of reason. Nature is neither the object of aesthetic judgment, nor is it the recipient of our feelings of astonishment (terror and respect). Rather, what one thinks is the sublime in nature is actually the subject's transcendence over the physical. Moreover, the mind's assertion of superiority occurs *as* self-preservation; it transitions the subject from a "being of nature" to a being of a different, nonsensuous order. From Burke's *Enquiry* to Kant's "Analytic of

Figure 2. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Snowstorm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth*, 1842. Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9 cm. The Tate Gallery/Digital Image © Tate, London 2009.

Figure 3. Edward Burtynsky, *China Recycling #8, Plastic Toy Parts*, Guiyu, Guangdong Province, China, 2004. Chromogenic colour print. Image copyright Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, & Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary.

the Sublime," nature is dispelled into enigmatic sensations that are translated, through subreption, into representations that are merely analogous to the magnitude of reason. In this way, the sublime aesthetic is rooted in a determination to gain "dominion" over nature.[20]

Self-Preservation and the Wasting Subject

How has the structure of the sublime experience been brought to bear on contemporary representations of environmental degradation? Is its imperative to transcend nature in some way relevant to our current ecological predicament? Edward Burtynsky's photographs suggest that there is such a connection, not only because of the menacing quality of his scenes of toxicity, pollution, and accumulated trash, but also because this waste acts as a visual surrogate for the wild, chaotic nature one would expect to see in the tradition of sublime painting.

In many ways, Joseph Mallord William Turner's paintings epitomize the scenario of the Burkean sublime, in which nature is a malevolent atmosphere that threatens to obscure sight and overwhelm thought. In *Snow Storm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842, fig. 2), for example, ocean, cloud, and sleet combine in a swirling tidal wave to descend on a barely discernable ship, located in the eye of the storm at the centre of the canvas. Similar in composition, Burtynsky's *China Recycling #8, Plastic Toy Parts* (2004, fig. 3) depicts curvilinear bands of colour that rear into an array of sky blue, muddy black, and gray punctuated with bursts of red, pink, and yellow. Fluid as this vortex of colour appears, it is not a rancorous tempest but a heap of trash: plastic toy parts that have been pried apart and are being sorted through in order to be either recycled or retired to a landfill. There is no mistaking the reference to the sublime. Without any visual device to position the pile of plastic on a human scale, it appears all encompassing, and almost mobile, the slight peak at the centre of the photograph merely the tip of an unrelenting spread to the edges of the image and beyond.

What links Burtynsky's image to sublime landscapes such as Turner's, however, is not simply the formal composition of the ground twisting into the sky, a mechanism of disorientation that risks up-ending the spectator's perspective, but also the fact that this threat is somehow linked to the uncanny return of a suppressed and chaotic nature. The nineteenth-century landscape often featured scenes of a wild and seemingly vengeful nature, intended to symbolically alleviate anxieties about increased urbanization and industrial production. However, instead of portraying a destructive natural force, Burtynsky posits a different kind of uncanny return that speaks strongly to the dichotomy between external nature and the internal mind. In replacing wild natural phenomena with plastic trash, the artist composes the landscape out of a manufactured and potentially toxic double. This waste is a far more insidious danger than nature, for it is positioned as the elemental basis of the scene and thus contaminates the very foundation of the landscape. Burtynsky draws on the landscape tradition to create the expectation of a churning ocean or gusts of wind while in fact the waves of hard plastic bury nature entirely. By signifying nature with trash, the artist reveals that the modern aesthetic of the sublime is rooted in an oscillation between nature and its prosthetic reconstruction in

the imagination. Further, he brings the contemporary issue of waste to bear on the sublime experience by creating, in much the way Kant describes, a movement of the mind that may "be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a quickly alternating attraction toward and repulsion from the same object."[21]

The issue at hand, then, is not simply that nature has been artificially fabricated, but that it has been replaced by garbage in particular. Burtynsky's *China Recycling* series calls to mind the prevalent motif of the ruin in sublime painting. In the landscape tradition, the ruin carries the connotation of the disappearance of history and of the absorption of civilization into the natural setting. Often, as in the case of Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* series (1836), which traces the emergence and demise of an imagined city, the ruin is encoded with the theme of modernity's underlying barbarism and corruption. In the fourth painting in Cole's series, *Destruction*, for example, the city is at war, its citizens collapsing into the agitated waters, its monuments destroyed, and its structures billowing smoke that covers the sky and imbues the scene with an apocalyptic atmosphere. Balance is restored, however, in the final painting of the series, *Desolation* (fig. 4), in which the abandoned city has been overtaken by growth, its arches and columns merging with the forest.

Burtynsky's *China Recycling #9, Circuit Boards* (2004, fig. 5) presents a comparable meeting of ruins and nature. Here, an undulating pile of rusting circuit boards (once again, seemingly fluid) laps at the edge of a treeline. Divided by a narrow dirt pathway that functions as a horizon line, there is a confrontation at play between the vegetation in the background and the detritus in the foreground. But instead of the contemplative atmosphere of Cole's *Desolation*, this ambivalent encounter between the natural and the artificial shifts the balance from the theme of nature's perseverance to that of the endurance of human history. The archaeologist William Rathje argues that our garbage is replete with historical information, and insofar as it has always been the material basis of archaeological study, it is also at the heart of our understanding of contemporary society.[22] The landfill, he suggests, is the site of our modern-day ruins and artifacts. Burtynsky's series mobilizes garbage in this way, targeting the end of the economic chain of production and consumption as the locus of human-nature contact, in much the same way that Cole pictures the end of civilization as a strategy to reveal the natural presence that always underlies human activity.

Figure 4. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Desolation,* 1836. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 63 1/4 in. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

Figure 5. Edward Burtynsky, *China Recycling #9, Circuit Boards*, Guiyu, Guangdong Province, China, 2004. Chromogenic colour print. Image copyright Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, & Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary.

What is most noticeable about the kind of trash in Burtynsky's photographs is its persistence, its magnitude (a quality related to the sense of accumulation), and its technological sophistication. The philosopher Barry Allen argues that our trash, everything from a polystyrene container to a pop-can tab, is composed of products that are highly complex in design.[23] Curiously enough, though, the degree of investment that goes into the production of goods does not ensure lasting value or usability, only material endurance. This is certainly the case with e-waste—trash such as computers, cell-phones, electronic chargers, all goods that emblematize the information age, but whose use-value turns so quickly that they are thrown away at a frighteningly accelerated pace. It is as though products are made in anticipation of their own status as artifact. Burtynsky's series addresses precisely this kind of "nearly new" waste. In addition to the plastic toys and circuit boards, the artist photographs piles of phone dials, wire, and aluminum. Further, by positioning

this trash *as* sublime nature, he demonstrates a perverse form of subreption; rather than endowing nature with the awe-inspiring qualities of reason, Burtynsky's landscapes erect a screen of garbage that encroaches on natural growth, not simply displacing it as the ground of the sublime experience, but actually threatening to choke it off. Rather than enacting the superiority of reason, the landscape of waste reveals the paradoxical condition of simultaneous progress and regress, technological advancement and degeneration.

French theorist Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the "glomus" speaks to this contradictory situation. He argues that the age of globalization is not necessarily a genuine reconceptualization of ourselves in an expansive network of communication and exchange, but rather an agglomeration that invades previous conceptions of the globe. This agglomeration forms the world into a manufactured double, the glomus, through the spread of techno-science, the exponential growth of populations, and a worsening of economic, biological, and cultural inequalities. He writes, "In the end, everything takes place as if the world affected and permeated itself with a death drive that soon would have nothing else to destroy than the world itself."[24] In Burtynsky's landscapes, garbage appears as a paradoxical signifier of both self-preservation and self-contamination. More pointedly, the photographs demonstrate how the principle of reason's superiority over nature mortifies the landscape into a synthetic environment and restricts vision to the confines of human agglomeration. The concealment of nature in trash and the closure of vision are co-extensive, thus disrupting the analogy between wild nature and the freedom of the mind.

Denaturation and Freedom in the Sublime

If trash can visually substitute for nature to constitute a sublime landscape, the question arises whether nature is even necessary to represent the limitlessness of reason. The philosopher Edward Casey pointedly asks, "Why do we continue to attribute sublimity to external physical nature…? Has not Kant, by his own ingenious hypothesis of subreption, too drastically detached the sublime from its moorings in actually experienced landscapes by displacing it from nature to mind?"[25] Why, despite the apparent absence of nature, do Burtynsky's landscapes nevertheless seem to evoke it? Perhaps the sublime does not entirely evacuate nature but actually opens the potential for a reconfiguration of the human relationship to it.

Jean-Luc Nancy argues that in the sublime experience the limitlessness of reason is fundamentally linked to freedom. He remarks that, for Kant, what was at stake in art was not the representation of truth but the presentation of liberty.[26] Further, he suggests it is nature's liberty that excites the sublime and delivers the idea of reason *as* a feeling of freedom:

> The sublime offering is the limit of presentation, and it takes place on and all along this limit, along the contour of form. The thing offered can be a thing of nature, and this is ordinarily according to Kant, the occasion of the feeling of the sublime. But since this thing, as a thing of liberty, is not merely offered but also offers itself, offers liberty…then this thing will be instead a thing of art (moreover, nature itself is always grasped here as a work of art, a work of supreme liberty).[27]

Through the process of subreption in the Kantian sublime, nature is endowed with the qualities of reason, or more precisely, it offers itself as a presentation of reason's boundlessness. Though Kant reinforces that the sublime is ultimately an experience that discovers the superiority of the faculty of judgment, at the same time it is nature that provides a sense of what Nancy calls the "unlimitation" of reason when it is represented by the imagination. Thus Kant writes, "We may describe the sublime thus: it is an object (of nature) *the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as the presentation of ideas.*"[28] Here, curiously, Kant concedes that nature possesses an unattainable quality—perhaps a residual sense of its physical grandeur—and it is precisely this unattainability that enables the imagination to glean a sense of the absolute magnitude of reason at its very limits. What is critical to Nancy's understanding of the sublime, then, is that in order for nature to connote the limitlessness of freedom, it must itself be free and have the capacity to *offer itself*, as opposed to being merely a fabrication of the imagination. In this way, Nancy raises a distinction between nature presenting itself from a position of fundamental alterity and the imagination representing nature. But, to be sure, both presentation and representation are at play in the sublime landscape.

Casey corroborates this point, arguing that nature is crucial to the sublime experience for it is the medium by which a re-implacement of the idea of reason can occur in the subject. Re-implacement, he asserts, is the opposite of subreption; it is the process by which the mind takes back upon itself the qualities it had bestowed upon nature and the mechanism by which the imagination presents an idea or image of reason's unlimitedness. Through subreption, the subject invests external nature with the idea of reason's infinitude, and through re-implacement the idea of reason is sensed as the liberty of nature. In this scenario, nature ceases to be itself and becomes the figure by which the freedom of reason occurs as an idea. As the figure of freedom, it is "grasped as a work of art, a work of supreme liberty." Yet, to suggest that nature is grasped *as* art, or *as* the idea of freedom, implies that its containment as represented form is a pre-condition for the idea of reason's unlimitedness. Since nature becomes *a figure* of reason, the sensation of it in and of itself arises and dis-

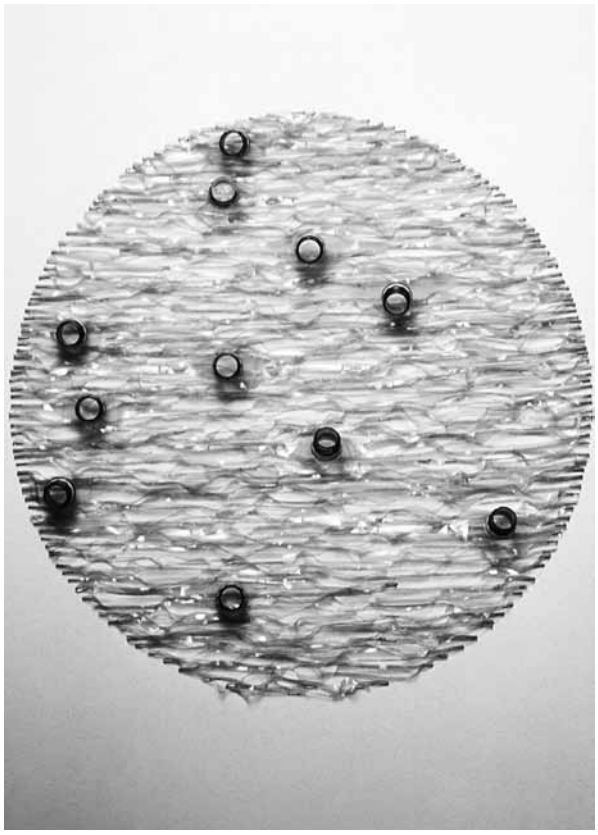

Figure 6. Jérôme Fortin, *Marine Rimousky*, 2002, plastic bottles. Private collection (André Blain).

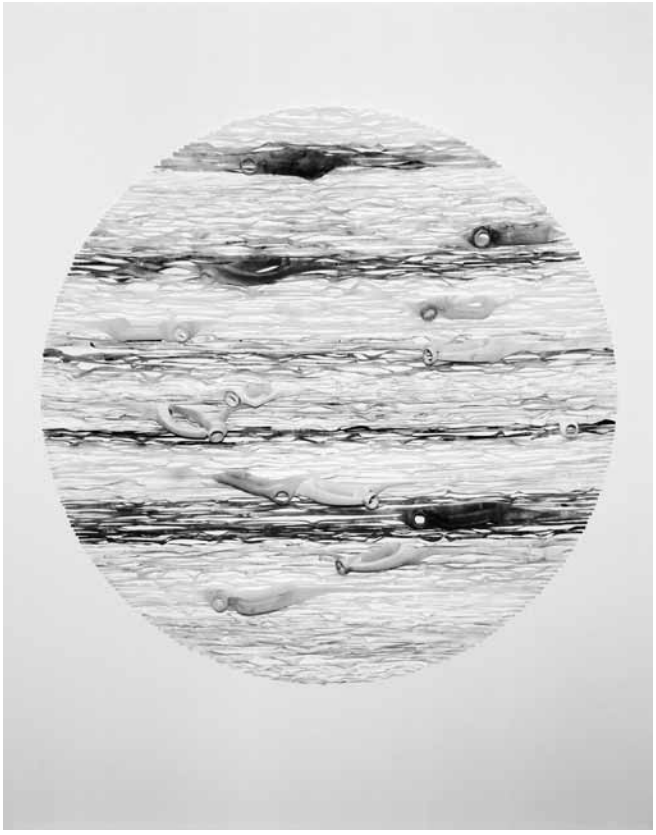

Figure 7. Jérôme Fortin, *Seascape Series*, 2001, plastic bottles. Photograph by Martin Rondeau.

sipates in the moment of its re-implacement as idea and as art. The feeling of nature's freedom inherent in its self-presentation cannot ever be contained within its figuration by the imagination. This is why Nancy describes the sublime as the sensibility of the fading of the sensible at the very limits of representational form. In the very event of its representation, nature overflows representational form and thus escapes the senses. Nancy writes,

> Stretched to the limit, the limit (the contour of the figure) is stretched to the breaking point, as one says, and it in fact does break, dividing itself in the instant between two borders, the border of the figure and its unlimited unbordering. Sublime presentation is the feeling of this striving at the instant of rupture, the imagination still for an instant sensible to itself although no longer itself, in extreme tension and distension ("overflowing" or "abyss").[29]

All this is to say that while the sublime experience is not confined to the direct confrontation with nature, nor does it necessarily lead to a respect *for* nature, as Burke suggested, there is nevertheless a valuable operation by which nature converges with the idea of freedom, and in its simultaneous appearance and disappearance in representation, pushes the borders of the imagination, offering a glimpse of what lies beyond. If this does not immediately seem important to an ecological ethic, then we might consider how the instrumentalization of nature takes place because of the restrictions of what Nancy calls "ecotechnology." He suggests that "natural life" (human, animal, vegetal, and viral), as well as the discourses that frame nature, is inseparable from a set of technological conditions that are produced for humans and by humans.[30] That is to say, natural life is not auto-produced or auto-maintained; it is always already produced by the technologies that manage it. Thus, there is no nature for us that is not thought *through* ecotechnology, be it a reductive biological model, the conservation paradigm, resource management, sustainability, global warming, hybrid cars, compact fluorescent light bulbs, and wind turbines, to name only a few of the many discourses and accompanying techniques that identify and define the natural realm in our relationship to it. Nancy's point is that ecotechnologies produce a sense of nature by their very "denaturation." That is to say, technology, which

is always a supplement and therefore a departure from the presumed stable and pure condition of nature, actually precedes what we understand nature to essentially be. Nature is inextricable from its non-natural origin in ecotechnologies. Nancy explains, "It is in denaturation that something like the representation of a 'nature' can be produced."[31]

It is therefore no coincidence that the trash in Burtynsky's landscapes both carries the anxieties of environmental crisis and evokes nature itself. Indeed, it appears that the former produces a sense of the latter, and thus nature as such is always already out of reach. Where traditionally in the sublime, nature is the figure that presents the idea of freedom, Burtynsky makes waste a barrier that pushes nature beyond the boundaries of the imagination, propelling it outside the limits of representation by obscuring one's visual reach. The ethical potential of the image lies in the fact that Burtynsky's alteration of the sublime positions nature as anterior to (before, or in visual terms, on the other side of) the mediation of ecotechnology. Garbage hedges in the human world and situates the freedom of nature, and the nature of freedom, as an infinitude that exceeds the pictorial screen that confronts the viewer. The image constitutes nature at the site of denaturation, inferring it at the same time as it blocks it from view.

Similarly, in Jérôme Fortin's *Seascapes* (2001–03, figs. 6, 7) garbage appears as a screen that evokes but forecloses nature. The series is composed of circular tondos of varying sizes and colours. Fortin uses the tondo format as a framing device, like a ship porthole through which one sees, what appears to be, the restless waves of the ocean. The waves, however, are made of cut-up plastic bottles. Fortin started collecting the bottles on his frequent walks along the St. Lawrence River at Saint-Jean-Port-Joli in northeastern Québec. He cut the bottles into thin curling strips that he then lined together in dense rows and stapled onto the round board. The tops of the bottles poke out of the curves of plastic, breaking the sense of fluid movement. From a distance, though, the different coloured strips of plastic call to mind the undulating reflections of light hitting water. In the same way that for Burke the ocean is the quintessential sublime subject because it connotes unfathomable terrors, Fortin's seascape suggests a nebulous and atmospheric view of water, with no horizon line, foreground, background, or other device to orient vision and stabilize the position of the spectator. The imagined water essentially permeates our view of the "seascape." But insofar as it is not water that fills the eye, but rather littered plastic, Fortin demonstrates how garbage functions as a lens through which one sees external nature. The plastic calls it to mind but displaces it simultaneously.

Through waste, Fortin demonstrates how the sublime functions as an ecotechnology; the landscape is the locus of a denaturation that generates the idea of nature. In its apparently organic distribution across the field of vision, trash demarcates a frontier that raises a sense of nature and renders it unattainable, as that which is always already outside of, but tied to, the technological framework that produced it. Insofar as Fortin construes garbage as a limit or screen that acts as a threshold to the unfathomable freedom of nature, he presents nature in its loss, as a fundamentally unstable term. It is precisely this instability that opens the possibility of questioning the apparatus by which nature is represented. Nancy argues, "It is thus also there [in denaturation] that comes forth on the one hand a specific technology of interrogation…at the same time as a thinking of the nonnatural origin of nature in the form of a '*creation ex nihilo.*'"[32] The suggestion here is that it is possible to question what lies beyond ecotechnology from a position within it. If nature is constituted for humans through denaturation, it is only by confronting ecotechnology at its limits (and, in this case, at the sites of sedimentation and agglomeration) that it becomes possible to sense phenomena that outstrip anthropocentric meaning. Herein lies the critical thrust of the contemporary use of the sublime; nature is no longer an external world that is seen, grasped, and formed, but rather the possibility of an earth that has been propelled outside the tight weave of production and waste. Nature is posited *through and against* garbage, as that which overflows the economic system but which touches the rubbish at its endpoint. Further, this touch invites us to strive for this excess, and the freedom it promises.

In their simultaneous occurrence in representation, nature and garbage come into contact with one another, and thus the landscape engages a sensorial dimension. To be sure, as I have already suggested, this sensibility manifests as the very sense of loss of nature as it overflows its own figuration in its simultaneous appearance and disappearance in its representation by the imagination. In this way, the contemporary sublime recalls Burke's understanding of nature as dispersed and nebulous, and effecting the privation of the senses. But invisible as nature may seem to be, it is nevertheless a palpable presence in Burtynsky's and Fortin's works. Both artists recycle trash, not simply to reuse it as art, but rather to call attention to the process of metamorphosis that acts upon the garbage. Burtynsky chooses recycling plants rather than landfills, depicting the machines, plastic toys, and circuit boards as they are pulled apart and piled together, thus visually obscuring the discreteness of the objects by weaving them into an abstract fabric. Likewise, Fortin's plastic bottles are cut, contorted, and reassembled in curling strips. Each of these procedures addresses the materiality of waste. More significantly, the laborious processes of transforming garbage are precisely what lend it elemental qualities such as the sense of its fluid undulation or that it is an overwhelming, sprawling substance. Not only does durable trash appear to be co-extensive with the disorienting and obscure natural phenom-

ena Burke describes, but in this shared space of representation, the latter is a catalyst for the disassembly of the former. Nature as such cannot be seen but nevertheless behaves as an inextricable and vital force that impresses itself into the screen of waste by stretching and tearing at it. Contradictorily, nature deforms the barrier of garbage that sublimates it out of sensibility. Thus, in its undoing of garbage and the visual limit that the screen of waste demarcates, nature registers its own disappearance from sense in its escape from representational form.

Conclusion

If the hyperproduction of garbage is a symptom of the spread of ecotechnology that reinforces human dominion over the planet, then the sublime landscape of waste enacts the loosening of this suffocating agglomeration. It is precisely the procedure of undoing, or "unworlding" to use Nancy's phrase, that is necessary to reinvent a relationship with the earth as such. What is at stake, then, is not merely a new visual language of nature, but, more precisely, a release from the constrictions of anthropocentric discourse altogether. Burtynsky and Fortin recall the sublime in order to raise the concept of nature and hold it at bay at the point of garbage accumulation. The insistent presence of nature leads to the transformation of the limit that garbage asserts, and opens the possibility of thinking of nature in its freedom from the technological enframement from which it arises.

Notes

1 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscapes," *Landscape and Power* (Chicago, 1994), 5.

2 Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), 85.

3 Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. J.T. Boulton (New York, 1958), 57.

4 Burke, 65.

5 Burke, 132.

6 Burke, 136.

7 Burke, 135.

8 Burke expressly implicates nature from the beginning of his discussion of the sublime when he writes, "The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment." Burke, 57.

9 Burke, 57.

10 Burke, 57–58.

11 "To make any thing terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Everyone will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds…." Burke, 58–59.

12 Burke, 86.

13 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York, 1951), 119–20.

14 Kant, 89.

15 Kant, 84.

16 Kant, 94.

17 Kant, 96.

18 Kant, 97.

19 Kant, 101.

20 To be sure, Kant is not arguing that the individual can cheat death, but rather that humanity writ large is retained through the dominion of nature.

21 Kant, 97.

22 Michael Shanks, David Platt, William L. Rathje, "The Perfume of Garbage: Modernity and the Archaeological," *Modernism/modernity* 11.1 (2004): 64.

23 Barry Allen, "The Ethical Artifact: On Trash," *Trash*, ed. John Knetchel (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 198.

24 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany, NY, 2007), 34.

25 Edward Casey, *Representing Place. Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis, 2002), 48–52.

26 Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany, NY, 1993), 28.

27 Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," 49.

28 Kant, 108 (emphasis in original).

29 Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," 45–46.

30 Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 94.

31 Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 87.

32 Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 87.