Visual Spaces of Change

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Production of Space and Creative Destruction in the Photographic Work of Naoya Hatakeyama

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Abstract

The photographic work of Naoya Hatakeyama is an extensive visual example of how natural resources serve as a fuel of capitalist production. In his three major series – *Lime Hills* (1986–91), *Lime Works* (1991–94), and *Untitled* (1989–2005) – Hatakeyama focuses on limestone to connect the world of natural landscape with the world of urban built structures. In Blast (1995–2008), the destructive force of capitalism and its devastating influence on the environment become literal: natural material is being torn into pieces in order to build a city. From exploitation of limestone hills, through the manufacture of concrete, to the construction of skyscrapers in a late capitalist city – the photographs transform the process of annihilation of rural space into timeless evidence of the humankind's domination over the natural environment. With his photographic bodies of work, Hatakeyama follows the idea of Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*, 1974) showing how nature is reduced to means of urban space production. What is fundamental to capitalism's destructive domination over the environment, is not only the possession of space, but also the ability to absorb, produce, and constantly transform it.

Keywords: *Creative Destruction, Landscape, Late Capitalism, Photography, Production of Space*

Marcin Piekalkiewicz (1987) is a visual artist working primarily with the still image. His practice is focused on how economic systems shape non-economic spheres of life. Marcin visually explores social and environmental effects of contemporary capitalism combining observational strategies of documentary photography with aesthetic approaches of conceptual photography. He is also interested in the relationship between the medium of photography and late capitalism. Marcin holds a PhD in Economics from University of Siena, Italy, and is currently pursuing an MA in Documentary Photography at University of South Wales, Cardiff. His photographic work has been presented on solo and group exhibitions in Italy, Poland, the UK, and the USA. Marcin was born in Warsaw, Poland, and is currently based in Malta.

Born in 1958, Naoya Hatakeyama spent the first nineteen years of his life in Rikuzentakata, a town located in Iwate Prefecture, Tohoku region, Japan. The town's nature-rich vicinities gave him access to river, ocean, mountains, and hills. Rikuzentakata was also surrounded by numerous factories and limestone quarries. This early exposure to natural and industrial landscapes became an influential factor for Hatakeyama's work[1]. His early photographic practice was then influenced by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Bernd and Hilla Becher, all known from the groundbreaking exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of Man-Altered Landscape*, organised at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in 1975, curated by William Jenkins.

The New Topographics photographers rejected the idealised, picturesque, human-free landscapes present in the work of their immediate forerunners, represented mostly by Ansel Adams. Instead, "they photographed everything that had previously been cropped out of American landscape photographs: the 'spaces in between', such as parking lots, industrial buildings, grain elevators, tract developments, shopping malls, freeway underpasses, and the like"[2]. The 1975 exhibition offered a collective redefinition of landscape as a man-altered hybrid, marking a new opening for visual representations of the industrial panorama. The photographs proposed to replace "the dualistic vision of man and nature implicit in the aesthetic of the sublime" with "the recognition that nature, too, had become a human artefact"[3].

In his study of recent practices of landscape photography, John Roberts[4] investigates the New Topographics school in light of Henri Lefebvre's[5] influential theory of the production of space. According to Lefebvre, the survival of capitalism is fully dependent on its ability to dominate over space in its entirety. This means the domination over not only the land, but also the underground resources, as well as "what might be called the above-ground sphere", i.e., "volumes or constructions considered in terms of their height, to the space of mountains and even of the planets".[6] In fact, what is fundamental to capitalism's domination, is not only the possession of space, but – most importantly – the ability to absorb, produce, and constantly transform it:

1 Yasufumi Nakamori, "Photographs of Site/Land That Transcend Time", in *Naoya Hatakeyama: Excavating the Future City*, ed. Yasufumi Nakamori (New York: Aperture, 2018a), 8–9.

2 Wendy Cheng, "'New Topographics': Locating Epistemological Concerns in the American Landscape", *American Quarterly 63*, no. 1 (2011): 151.

3 Elissa Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic", in *Monument – Patrimony – Heritage. Industrial Heritage and the Horizons of Terminology*, ed. S. Bogner, B. Franz, H.R. Meier and M. Steiner (Holzminden: Jörg Mitzkat, 2018), 227.

4 John Roberts, "Photography, Landscape and the Social Production of Space", *Philosophy of Photography 1*, no. 2 (2010): 135–56.

5 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 [1974])

6 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 325.

> "Not only has capitalism laid hold of pre-existing space, of the Earth, but it also tends to produce a space on its own. How can this be? The answer is: through and by means of urbanization, under the pressure of the world market; and, in accordance with the law of the reproducible and the repetitive, by abolishing spatial and temporal differences, by destroying nature and nature's time".[7]

Roberts[8] uses the example of New Topographics to show how Lefebvre's theory translates into photography. The practice of Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and others, focuses on the "crisis within the category of landscape" and responds to "the conceptual demands of social geography, or landscape as a social category". In other words, "the notion of landscape shifts from a place of repose or retreat underdetermined by human intervention, to one constantly shaped and transformed by the action of human labour and urban encroachment".[9]

In his three major series – *Lime Hills* (1986–91), *Lime Works* (1991–94), and *Untitled* (1989–2005) – Hatakeyama focuses on limestone, a material used for production of cement and concrete, to connect the world of natural landscape with the world of urban built structures. *Lime Hills* (Fig.1) is an effect of a five-year journey across Japan during which he captured the massive scale and sublime beauty of limestone deposits intervened upon by humans. The excavated parts of quarries are often contrasted against pastoral sceneries with the ocean – a proper birthplace of limestone – placed in the background. The photographs depict an irreversible transformation of hills, formed by nature millions of years ago, into man-altered landscapes created in the timespan of decades through the stone extraction. In *Untitled* (Fig.3), the viewer understands what the end purpose of this process is. The series constitutes a timeless record of urban structures produced with the materials which lead us back to the quarries photographed earlier: "Hatakeyama mentally projects the natural textures of limestone onto the sprawling city, connecting the concrete structures to their sources".[10] However, before a raw material can be used to build a city, it needs to be industrially refined to become solid. Hatakeyama illustrates this intermediate step in *Lime Works* (Fig.2) by photographing limestone-processing plants, which are a tangible link between the natural and the man-made. If "the quarries and the cities are like negative and positive images of a single photograph"[11], then limestone could be the celluloid, while factories producing concrete and cement would act as the darkroom.

7 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 326.
8 Roberts, "Photography, Landscape and the Social Production of Space".
9 Roberts, "Photography, Landscape and the Social Production of Space", 150.
10 Yasufumi Nakamori,"III: Trans/Flux", in *Naoya Hatakeyama: Excavating the Future City*, ed. Yasufumi Nakamori (New York: Aperture, 2018c), 131.
11 Naoya Hatakeyama, "Lime Works", in *Naoya Hatakeyama: Excavating the Future City*, ed. Yasufumi Nakamori (New York: Aperture, 2018), 255.

With the three bodies of work, Hatakeyama follows the Lefebvrian idea of capitalism showing how nature is reduced to means of urban space production. For Hatakeyama, space is, however, as important as time. Started in 1995, the long-running series *Blast* (Fig.4) is probably Hatakeyama's most well-known body of work. By using a remote-controlled 35mm camera on a tripod and placing it in accordance with the advice of a blast technician, who was able to precisely predict the trajectories of limestone pieces, Hatakeyama managed to freeze the moment of natural resource extraction. Even though each explosion lasted only seconds, the photographs extend the event by integrating multiple frames into sequences. The collapse of "these fragments of time into a series of single frames" allowed Hatakeyama to reexamine "the use of the camera as a tool for capturing an instant".[12]

12 Yasufumi Nakamori, "I: Birth/Genesis", in *Naoya Hatakeyama: Excavating the Future City*, ed. Yasufumi Nakamori (New York: Aperture, 2018b.), 29.

[Fig. 1]
Hatakeyama, Naoya. 1988. Lime Hills #22916.

[Fig. 2]
Hatakeyama, Naoya. 1994. Lime Works #41408.

[Fig. 3]
Hatakeyama, Naoya. 1997. Untitled #52810.

Even though the aesthetics of *Blast* (Fig.4) substantially differs from the previous series – explosion close-ups versus wide-angle landscapes – there is a remarkable consistency when it comes to the subject matter. As explained by Hatakeyama in the afterword to the *Blast* monograph, the "moment when the limestone is burst apart could be called the moment when nature changes into city".[13] This complements his earlier work focused on the nature-to-city transformation. A violent detachment of limestone pieces from the Earth surface results to be a predecessor of the process depicted in *Lime Hills*, *Lime Works*, and *Untitled*. An act of demolition gives birth to the production of urban space.

This contrast between destroying and creating could be interpreted as a visual metaphor for capitalism's reproduction properties. Werner Sombart, a German Marxist economist, pointed out the creation-destruction paradox to describe the degradation of forests in Europe as the

13 Naoya Hatakeyama, Blast (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2013) cited in Dan Abbe, "Naoya Hatakeyama", in *Photographers Sketchbooks*, ed. Stephen McLaren and Bryan Formhals (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 118.

[Fig. 4]
Hatakeyama, Naoya. 1995. Blast #0608.

foundation of nineteenth-century capitalism.[14] Earlier, Karl Marx had emphasized capitalism's creative-destructive tendencies. He argued that capitalism destroys the old pre-capitalist economy and "constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces".[15] Marx referred to the creative-destructive forces of capitalism also to explain cyclical economic crises: devaluation of existing wealth was a necessary condition to allow for creation of new wealth.[16] An Austrian political economist, Joseph A. Schumpeter – born in the year of Marx's death – proposed the term "creative destruction" to explain the business cycle. He argued that innovation, a driving force of the economy and its fluctuations, "incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism".[17]

Today, critics of capitalism would rather refer to the term "destructive creation" to emphasise the adverse side of the process. The creation of capitalist systems, including globalised markets and neoliberal economic policies, leads to the destruction of natural heritage and social structures.[18] In fact, what fuels capitalism, is not only the environmental deterioration, but also the decline of interpersonal relationships. The growing psychological attachment to consumer goods offering substitutes to what has been destroyed by the capitalist system, results in an ever-increased consumer demand and further drives the production, which, in turn, leads to even greater exploitation of human and natural resources. What is more, capitalism – based on the neoliberal idea of the free market driven by competition – turns out to be detrimental for social cohesion and interpersonal trust.[19] The instrumental perception of others as competitors in the economic sense has a destructive impact on community and family life.[20] The destructive impact of capitalism on the non-economic spheres of life turns out to be even more dramatic when we consider the environment. From an economic, neoliberal point of view, the use of

14 Werner Sombart, *Der Moderne Kapitalismus* (München: Leipzig, Duncker & Humblot, 1927 [1902]), 207; cited in Hugo Reinert and Erik S. Reinert, "Creative Destruction in Economics: Nietzsche, Sombart, Schumpeter"; in *Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900): Economy and Society*, ed. J.G. Backhaus and W. Drechsler (Boston: Springer, 2006), 72.

15 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1993 [1939]), 410.

16 David Harvey,"The Urban Process under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 2*, no. 1–3 (1978): 116.

17 Joseph Alois Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2010 [1942]), 73.

18 Mireille Coral, Jeff Noonan and Paul Chislett, "Destructive Creation", *Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research 27*, no. 1 (2016): 313–25.

19 Stefano Bartolini, "Building Sustainability through Greater Happiness", *The Economic and Labour Relations Review 25*, no. 4 (2014): 587–602.

20 David H. Ciscel and Julia A. Heath, "To Market, to Market: Imperial Capitalism's Destruction of Social Capital and the Family", *Review of Radical Political Economics 33*, no. 4 (December 18, 2001): 401–14.

natural resources – i.e., raw materials such as limestone – as means of production is determined by the rules of the free market. The demand will drive the supply, eventually setting the equilibrium price and the quantity produced. However, the supply of natural resources is limited, which contrasts with the endless capitalist demand for means of production.[21] This, therefore, leads to a conflict between the economy and the environment, between production of goods and exploitation of natural resources, between creation of capitalism and destruction of society.

The production of space represented in the work of Hatakeyama is an accurate example of how natural resources serve as a fuel of capitalism reproduction. From exploitation of limestone hills, through the manufacture of concrete, to the construction of skyscrapers in late capitalist Tokyo. In *Blast*, the destructive force of capitalism and its devastating influence on the environment become literal: natural material is being torn into pieces in order to build a city. The photographs transform the process of annihilation of rural space into timeless evidence of humankind dominating over the natural environment. This domination, which – according to Lefebvre – allows capitalism to reproduce through the production of urban space, is possible thanks to the use of technology.

What signifies the technological in *Blast*, is the use of explosives by technicians who can precisely forecast the trajectory of each detonation. The series "breaks the explosions down into visual, moment-by-moment representations of the technician's predictions".[22] Hatakeyama admits that *Blast* should rather be read as a body of work dedicated to technology and science:

> "Taking stones out of earth has much longer history than capitalism. For me Blast is a matter of 'human hands' or 'technic'. So, the question would be: 'Technic/Art/Science leads and the capitalism follows. How?' Or: 'How does Technic/Art/Science make capitalism possible?' To my eyes Blast doesn't look [like] destruction at all, actually it doesn't ruin too much, as capitalism does."[23]

No matter whether it is capitalism to follow the technological and scientific progress, or vice versa, one could argue that both, technology and science – just as raw materials – are means of production used by capitalism for the sake of its reproduction. Tools, machines, and explosives are there to allow capitalist systems to dominate over the planet and its underground resources. In fact, technology "as a means of extending humanity's control over nature has radically and irreversibly changed the relation between society and its erstwhile handmaiden".[24]

21 Ted Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits: An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction", *New Left Review 178* (1989): 51–86, and Walker, K. J. "Ecological Limits and Marxian Thought," *Politics 14*, no. 1 (1979): 29–46.

22 Nakamori, "I: Birth/Genesis.", 29.

23 Hatakeyama, N. Email message to author, January 22, 2020.

24 Robert L. Heilbroner, "Technology and Capitalism", *Social Research 64*, no. 3 (1997): 1324–1325.

Another important aspect of the means of production are the associated social relations. Guy Debord[25] defines them as the "spectacle". The concept "involves a distinction between passivity and activity and consumption and production, condemning lifeless consumption of spectacle as an alienation from human potentiality for creativity and imagination".[26] The spectacular society would therefore be characterised by the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment, and ruled by a commercialized media culture and the dictatorship of advertising. The keywords defining the spectacular society would then be "fascination" and "pleasure". In the *Blast* series, Hatakeyama directly refers to these terms:

> "A huge object that has been stable for a long time – long before our birth – instantly changes its appearance in front of our eye. It collapses with a loud noise, disintegrates, and disappears completely. Such a material change is the complete opposite of what we find in naturesque changes that bring us tranquillity and mediation: the leisurely flow of a river, the gentle shifts of four seasons, and the slow growth of a living thing. It is an instantaneous occurrence caused by brutal, unnatural forces. It makes us feel neither peace nor tranquillity; rather, it imposes upon us a sense of cruelty and evil. At the same time, the scene of an explosion fascinates us. Don't we find an invigorating pleasure in those scenes repeated ad nauseum in films, television dramas, and cartoons?"[27]

Blast invites the viewer – a passive spectator – to visually consume the act of capitalist creative destruction. The photographic medium becomes a channel not only allowing that consumption to happen, but also recording the destruction itself.

The recently published retrospective of Hatakeyama's photographic practice – titled *Excavating the Future City*[28] – opens with the following words of the artist: "A 'record' is always predicated on the gaze from the future. Even if the sight that is visible in that record comes from the past, a photograph [of the sight] itself is like a boat that will be carried endlessly into the future".[29] As noted by the editor of the volume, Yasufumi Nakamori, Hatakeyama "takes the position that a photograph as a record will have different lives as seen at various future moments, and thus the photograph, as a lived image, belongs to the future"[30]. This standpoint contrasts with the conclusion in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*,[31] who argued that every photograph implies the death of a subject. Even though Hatakeyama's photographs do not incorporate the death in a Barthesian sense, they are still able to refer to a form of silent passing, or rather, a quiet dissolution. "Metaphorically and physically, with the camera, Hatakeyama has excavated into

25 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2005 [1967]).

26 Douglas Kellner, "Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle", *Fast Capitalism 1*, no. 1 (2005): 60.

27 Hatakeyama cited in Nakamori, "I: Birth/Genesis", 25.

28 Yasufumi Nakamori, *Naoya Hatakeyama: Excavating the Future City*, ed. Yasufumi Nakamori (New York: Aperture, 2018)

29 Hatakeyama, "Photographs of Site/Land That Transcend Time", 8.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000 [1980]).

the sedimentation of a subject, be it a lime hill mined for the sake of natural resources or a town demolished by natural forces''. Hatakeyama's work is determined by his wish to ''collapse a conventional time sequence of the past–present–future and create an image out of the rubble that offers a vision of the cityscape to come – an excavation of the future city'.[32]

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag argues: ''Cameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is available to record what is disappearing''.[33] The destructive forces of capitalism manifested in Hatakeyama's annihilation of the natural landscape turn this recording into a very unsettling exercise. The photographic traces of human existence left for future generations will only serve as a testimony of our environmental barbarism.

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32 Hatakeyama, ''Photographs of Site/Land That Transcend Time'', 8.
33 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2008 [1977]), 15–16.

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