

Landscapes of care
the emergence of landscapes of care in unstable territories



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Unexpected Landscapes. Wastelands as 'buffer zones' for the future

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Abstract

Land worldwide is deeply marked by human activity, which became heavier, harder, more wasteful, and permanent after the industrial revolution. The landscapes of the Anthropocene are the landscapes of growth, production, and destruction: unexpected sceneries, consequential to the aim to profit from the exploitation of natural resources, are the object of increasing interest in different forms of visual art. The representation of the Bingham Canyon Mine near Salt Lake City, the former Fresh Kills landfill in New York, and the decommissioned Tempelhof Airport in Berlin suggest how wounded lands may hold unforeseen values in the current age, not limited to being environmental scars but involving their being potential players of unpredictable cultural and strategic functions in the next future.

Keywords: landscape, wasteland, mine, landfill, infrastructure

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THEORETICAL PAPERS

Land worldwide is deeply marked by human activity, which became heavier, harder, more wasteful, and permanent after the industrial revolution. The landscapes of the Anthropocene encompass riddled proving grounds and test sites, nuclear wastelands, immense open-pit mines, contaminated lands, disappearing bodies of water, boundless landfills, and discarded territories. These grounds bear the signs of production, extraction, and exploitation processes: human activities since the dawn of time, decisive drivers of the constant evolution of humankind's habitats worldwide. As Kevin Lynch summarizes in *Wasting Away*: "The Maori made garden soils over extensive areas of New Zealand by laborious digging, the addition of sand, weeding, and burning. Lands partially in the grass were by fire converted to continuous prairies, unleashing severe erosion and silting the river mouths. Once these economic resources were established, they turned to war, built massive fortified settlements, and abandoned much of their garden land. Whole regions were depopulated and went back to waste. Many settlements were sacked. The flight-less moa was slaughtered and driven to extinction, leaving bone deposits as dense as 800 skeletons to the acre. The Maori mined these sites for tools, and then the Europeans carted the bones to mills to make fertilizer. These ruins, boneyards, soils, grasslands, siltings, erosions, new and vanished species—along with the usual massive changes brought on by the European settlers—are all part of the productive landscape of New Zealand today"¹.

These 'unexpected landscapes', consequential to the aim to profit from the exploitation of natural resources, are the object of increasing interest in different forms of visual art. Among many examples, Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky has been depicting the effects of production-related human activities on landscapes since the late Seventies, with a series of images bearing the echo of an unavoidable consumption of soil, irretrievable destruction of the natural environment, and unrecoverable alteration of global equilibriums leading to a final, close annihilation. In 2010, German-Italian artist Rosa Barba filmed *The Long Road*, a 35mm video artwork depicting an abandoned race track, discovered by the artist in the Mojave desert. In the artwork, Barba travels along the track, a trace left behind by human activity: "[...] When the track is in use, it becomes a grand act of landscape-size writing, a potential that sits in wait of Barba's film. [...]"². Barba's artwork depicts the act of reading again a document of the past through art, unveiling lost information and activating new cultural meanings; it suggests how wounded lands may hold unforeseen values in the current age, not limited to being environmental scars, and the role that representation may play in their perception as potential players of unpredictable cultural and strategic functions in the next future.

¹ Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991), 104.

² Ben Borthwick and Melissa Gronlund, "Rosa Barba: Changing Cinema", *Afterall.org* (2010). Available at: <https://www.afterall.org/article/changing-cinema> (accessed on April 27th, 2022).



Among the destructive activities carried out by humankind, extraction and mining are those that most severely modify the surface of the Earth. The Bingham Canyon Mine, also known as Kennecott Copper Mine, was opened in 1906 in the southeast of Salt Lake City, Utah; since then, the mining activity has created a crater more than 1 km-deep and 4 km-wide, on 770 hectares, inserted in 1966 in the National Register of Historic Places with the name of *Bingham Canyon Open Pit Copper Mine*. In recent years, the mine has been expanded and new plans exist to prolong its activity until 2030. The current management focuses on the progressive decommissioning of the mine, following its expansion: as new veins are followed, the exhausted ones are left as open-air voids. These craters are among the main issues left behind by the extractive activity: companies usually deal with the afterlife of the mine with attempts of renaturalization of these exhausted lands, trying to reabsorb them in the landscape. However, these shafts are powerful sceneries able to register—in the present and the future—the evolution of our relationship with the environment, natural resources, production, and consumption patterns; they can be read as documents and lend themselves to be given new meanings by future generations only if they are preserved and experienced in the form human activities has given them.

[Fig. 1]
Mining operations at Bingham Canyon Mine, Utah, 2009.
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THEORETICAL PAPERS

The many existing pictures of the mine—both those taken by great photographers such as Edward Burtynsky, David Maisel, and Peter Goin and those taken by the visitors—portray the astonishing size of the chasm, the several visual planes, the outline of the crater, looking as shaped by an unfathomable superior design. These pictures—all depicting the same relationship between the observers and the spectacle—prove the spontaneous fruition of the mine as a scenery. They unlock its possibility to be perceived as a potential bearer of new values and roles in aesthetic, socioeconomic, and ecological terms. The panoramic observatory installed on the edge of the Bingham chasm seals this agency; it activates the immediate relationship between landscape and gaze, recalling the primary function of the latter in the fruition of places: without a gaze, there is no landscape. The reciprocal condition between the observer and the Bingham scenery recalls the one subsisting in a Greek theater, that “marks the spectator’s place on the unstaged scene of a landscape, open to the divine power of sight. [...] The theater is the place of landscape knowledge”³. The architecture of the Greek theater is closely related to nature: its *cavea* is only minimally excavated since it rests on the side of a hill to take advantage of the natural slope as much as possible; the integration into nature is sublimated by the panorama overlooking the hill, which became the very scene of the shows. While the Greek theater relies on nature in a whole full of meaning, the Bingham mining *cavea* has been excavated for more than a century in a completely artificial way, perpetrating the most extraneous purpose to the agreement with nature: its exploitation. This process, however, has unintentionally shaped a landscape in which artificial codes blend with natural ones, and where a man-made scenery is enjoyed and used as a natural panorama. Tourists and visitors go to Bingham to observe a breathtaking view, but what they contemplate is a void, an absence. They perform a new relationship with the environment: the memorialization of a lost landscape that vanished forever along with the unfolding of earth-related processes of the Anthropocene.

An example of the unexpected roles the mine can play—as well as its representation in the framework of artworks—is the interest it raised in Robert Smithson, who in 1973 proposed to Kennecott Copper Corporation a spontaneous reclamation project for Bingham’s mine pit, part of a series of interventions “that would transform devastated industrial sites into a new form of public art”⁴. Smithson claimed that “the world needs coal and highways, but we do not need the results of strip-mining or highway trusts. [...] Art can become a resource, that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist”⁵. *Bingham Copper Mining Pit – Utah Reclamation Project* was part of a portfolio of projects that Smithson proposed to mining companies since, at the beginning of the 70s, they started to be pressured to adopt cautionary measures concerning possible toxic waste as a result of extractive activities, following the environmental awareness

3 Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, *Percepire paesaggi. La potenza dello sguardo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2009), 52. Quotation translated by F. Zanotto.

4 Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt (eds), *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 220.

5 Ibid.

widespread in the US after the birth of civil right movements and federal policies as the Clean Air Act. The Kennecott company itself, when receiving Smithson's proposal, was evaluating some reclaiming projects before they would have been imposed by federal regulations. Smithson was hoping to start a collaboration with mining companies, given their growing interest in innovative systems for recovery and reclamation. For his proposal to Kennecott, the artist combined photography and drawing: he presented a photocopy of a picture of the crater, to which he overlaid his project, drawn with white wax and a black pencil on a transparent plastic sheet. Bingham's stepped walls were abstracted so much to "resemble natural forms such as tree rings or the sedimentary layers of earth's crust, and the sense of scale suggests epic and overwhelming forces at work"⁶. The crater already met Smithson's aesthetic and he had no intention to modify it: he just intervened by designing a revolving disk to be placed at the bottom of the pit, featuring four hooklike signs on a white ground. "The object is engaging; employing both pre existing and imagined forms, it invites the viewer to envision the site transformed by the installation"⁷. During heavier rains, the hooklike lines would become jetties on the water collected in the cavity, placed at the center of the visual field to be the focus of the composition: the disk would have soon turned yellow because of toxic spills and acid rock drainage. The rotation suggested by the artist would have allowed the visitors to observe a 360-degree spiral show of the canyon, standing still in one spot: a way to acknowledge the progressive and unavoidable action of humankind on the natural order.

Wastelands constitute potential 'buffer zones' to meet unforeseen conditions and necessities that may occur in the framework of contemporary instability. Right after the events of 9/11, during the first rescue operations that followed the dramatic fall of the Twin Towers, it was immediately clear that on the site of the attack, in lower Manhattan, there was a pressing issue about space. *The pile*⁸—as the terrifying mass of smoldering matter left behind by the fall of the towers was simply called—would have been gradually dismembered to recover survivors and victims' remains and the huge amount of steel and debris had to find a place as soon as possible, not to stay on the site and impede rescue operations. In the density of Manhattan, a quick and practical relocation of such a huge amount of material had to look outwards: Giuliani administration, in the urge to find an immediate solution, decided to use the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island, which was opened in 1948 and closed just some months before 9/11, on the way to start a process of reclamation. Covering a surface doubling Central Park, the landfill demonstrated to be especially suitable to work as a collecting area for World Trade Center's debris thanks to its water docking; furthermore, the possibility to use barges to move debris instead of trucks would allow bigger and quicker loads and would have kept debris far away from

6 Jennifer Padgett, "Robert Smithson", *Notations: Contemporary Drawing as Idea and Process*. Available at: <http://notations.aboutdrawing.org/robert-smithson/> (accessed on April 27th, 2022).

7 Ibid.

8 William Langewiesche, *American Ground. Unbuilding the World Trade Center* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 11.

THEORETICAL PAPERS

roads, avoiding the diffusion of harmful dust. Fresh Kills was the biggest landfill in the US, with five hundred hectares of buried waste, more than fifty years of New York trash that, in certain areas, stood above the Staten Island estuary for sixty meters. Seventy hectares were devoted to the operations on World Trade Center's rubble, identified in an area on top of the higher hills, then renamed Mound Four. The pile in lower Manhattan was dismantled piece by piece and taken to Fresh Kills. At first, the towers' steel was sorted, cut into pieces, and sold, taken away on huge cargo ships; it was high-quality steel, too expensive to be reused in American steel mills, cheaper in other countries, where recycling costs were lower and industrial regulations less strict. The remaining mass of debris was taken to the top of Mound Four, where it was rebuilt in other, inconstant forms, giving rise to a new arrangement, "into little mounds, where the sorting began. The hilltop was a wild-looking place, with American flags whipping in cold winds, like the outpost of a government expedition to a toxic planet. It was scattered about with heavy equipment, truck trailers, and prefabricated structures of various kinds [...]"⁹. A temporary city was soon settled on the top of the hill, named The City on The Hill¹⁰; the Hilltop Café, run by the Salvation Army and the American Red Cross, served food and drinks to more than 1500 people per day, busy in the sorting operation of Twin Towers' remains. Once the recovery operations were over and the landfill definitively closed in the summer of 2002, the relocation process of the remaining rubble started. The debris was finally used to give a fixed arrangement to the cycle of sceneries: integrated into the hills of Fresh Kills, they have become the soil for a new park, establishing a link with the past of the city of New York itself, built on its own 'historical garbage'. A reclamation project in phasis is transforming the former landfill into an urban park three times as large as Central Park, that by 2035 will offer to residents and tourists 890 hectares of wilderness, sports centers, facilities for water activities, educational and artistic centers, sports fields, and free green areas. William Langewiesche describes the process of integration of the rubble into the morphology of Freshkills park: "the interments began right away, in a patchwork pattern across the hilltop, and consisted not of digging graves but of spreading the Trade Center remains and covering them over with a thick blanket of earth. In that most unexpected way, the hilltop slowly grew, with the World Trade Center adding rolls and variations to the ground where someday people would come to relax. In fact, nothing was just 'thrown out at the dump'—not a single piece of those buildings. [...] by midsummer, less than a year after the attack, the World Trade Center and its burned and pulverized contents lay under bare earth, absorbed, like so much else of New York's past, into the man-made hills of Fresh Kills"¹¹.

9 William Langewiesche, *American Ground*, 194.

10 New York State Museum, "Fresh Kills", NYS Museum. Available at <https://exhibitions.nysm.nysed.gov/wtc/recovery/freshkills.html> (accessed on April 27th, 2022).

11 William Langewiesche, *American Ground*, 196–198.



The shocking pictures of lower Manhattan devastated by the towers collapse depicted with striking clarity the challenge that the city would have faced in the following months: recover from the trauma through the reconstruction of its urban environment, which first act would have been finding a place to relocate and sort out the shapeless pile of matter fallen onto the city after the attack. The mass of debris, changing constantly shape and scale along the process, from Manhattan to the Fresh Kills site, gave shape to a series of temporary landscapes and unstable sceneries, with different values evolving over time as the perception of what happened. The pictures of the new Freshkills park, of its gentle hills and welcoming grasslands, constitute an impressive counterpart to the chaotic spectacle of 9/11: they mark the end of the reconstruction process and create the space for a collective recovery. This visual sequence stresses the unexpected opportunities lying in wastelands as potential 'buffer zones' ready to accommodate unforeseen necessities.

[Fig. 2]

Fresh Kills Landfill on fire, New York, 2012.

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THEORETICAL PAPERS

Infrastructure is another means through which humankind severely affects its own environment, one of the main causes of soil consumption as well as another form of unpredicted landscape-making. When infrastructure gets decommissioned, its environmental toll rises due to the inefficient use of resources employed in its construction, as well as the consumption of those that would be necessary for reclamation works. The case of Tempelhof Airport in Berlin shows how the abandonment of a complex infrastructure has resulted in the preservation of an empty area which proved to be extremely valuable as the city has grown dense around it for ninety years. After the closure of the airport in 2008, the area was left as a great void in the urban fabric; its shape and simple design, consisting of two long runways and an outer ring, are easily readable on a topographical scale. The decommissioning generated a site that was spatially well-defined, but extremely imprecise from a functional point of view. A place that embodied the concept of 'negative': at the moment in which something is drawn and an outline is traced, it gives rise, at the same time, to an inside and an outside. "The two spaces that derive from the separation between what is superfluous and what is necessary therefore present antithetical characteristics: while the first is indeterminate, the second presents the characteristics of designed order or form"¹². Normally, the term 'indeterminate' refers to what is left out of the design; in this case, however, the balance is reversed. The airport has been designed at the time, the outline has been traced to identify an area separated from the rest, to carry out a specific activity; at the moment of the closure of the airport and the opening of the area as a public park in 2010, however, Tempelhof was surrounded by the city, by the order and planning of roads and buildings, while within its perimeter the programmatic indeterminacy reigned. It is precisely this uncertainty that makes Tempelhof a cherished place in the city of Berlin. The park is enormous and yet, from the surrounding fabric, almost invisible, perfectly harmonized with the urban environment. Inside the perimeter fence, the horizon is visible but distant, the paved roads are much wider than any tree-lined avenue in the city, and the extension of the lawns is emphasized by the total absence of trees and bushes.

This wide proportion is depicted by the photographic representation of the park: pictures insist on the horizontal dimension of the space, marked by the vast, empty surface of the landing strips and the open sky above them. In the middle of these two broad canvases, there is space for any unpredicted communal or individual experience. The activities performed on its runways are many and different: the boundless definition of the place reflects its users' inner tension for freedom of action. Lynch himself, in *Wasting Away*, touches on this point: "in abandoned places, the release from a sense of immediate human purpose allows freer action, as well as free mental reconstruction. [...] Many waste places have these ruinous attractions: release from control, free play for action and fantasy, rich and varied sensations"¹³. These places shield the first weak forms

¹² Sara Marini, *Nuove Terre. Architetture e paesaggi dello scarto* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010), 49. Quotation translated by F. Zanotto.

¹³ Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away*, 25.



of some new things¹⁴ and for this reason, they not only arouse a concrete attraction but also have a certain importance for the growth and development of society. In the dense and programmed city of Berlin, Tempelhof represents a place for openness, freedom, and self-expression: this invaluable role has been stressed by the result of a popular referendum that in 2014 halted the development of real estate plans in the area, safeguarding the site as it was—and still is.

The unexpected landscapes produced by the Anthropocene are today read as the staging of the dominance of humankind over the environment, derelict spans of exploited land to be reclaimed or 'brought back to nature'. The illustrated examples, however, demonstrate how these lands—compromised to the point to be useless, locked down, and inaccessible in some cases—may represent a resource for the future, and photographic representation plays a crucial role in the process of cultural acceptance of this opportunity. Images hold the power to unveil potential new roles and interpretations of these landscapes, unlocking the process of envisioning and outlining strategies for their preservation. This could mean being able to conserve strategic areas for unforeseen necessities—even paradoxically uncontaminated in comparison to future conditions we still cannot predict—and enable crucial roles they may fulfill after the Anthropocene, according to Haraway "more a boundary event than an epoch, [a time that] marks severe discontinuities"¹⁵.

¹⁴ Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away*, 153.

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 100.

[Fig. 3]

Berlin Tempelhof Airport Runway 09L, Berlin, 2014. Credit: Tony Webster.
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THEORETICAL PAPERS

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