

**Wanderings Through the Fog: Axel Hütte and the German landscape tradition reimagined**

WHITE, Darcy

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# Wanderings through the fog: Axel Hütte and the German landscape tradition re-imagined

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*Darcy White*

With the opening question of Stephan Berg's published conversation with German photographer Axel Hütte (b. 1951), the interviewer sets out to establish the artist's relationship with, and attitude to, the tradition of photography with which he is almost invariably linked: "Is there such a thing as the Düsseldorf School of Photography?", Berg asks, and to which Hütte makes an emphatic reply: "No. Of course not" (Berg 2009: 9).

Judging by the content of the reviews and critiques that Hütte's photography has inspired, this association with the so-called 'Düsseldorf', or 'Becher', School serves to frame, shape and effectively delimit the way/s in which his work is experienced and understood, by viewers, reviewers and academics. And, presumably, it is this that motivates both Berg's question and the artist's response – given that Hütte has gone out of his way to create images that encourage a viewer to experience them directly, that is, in the present – without recourse to the history of western art and where his intentions as an artist are purposefully concealed. I'm taking this as my starting point for a discussion of, and contribution to, a discourse on the work of one of Europe's leading landscape photographers because it enables me to flush-out, and illustrate with a precise example, how works of art with enigmatic subject-matter, themselves become the subject of a stream of interpretations and speculations on their meanings – in this case one that undermines what this artist is seeking to do. The "fog" of my title therefore refers to more than one thing; the visual device employed within Hütte's photographs, establishing ambiguity by obscuring what lies beyond, and the elaborate discourses that circulate and swirl, fog-like, both obfuscating and beckoning us towards something tantalizingly just beyond our perception – 'always already' deferred (Derrida 1973); to paraphrase Derrida's essential characteristic of a deconstructed text; an ambiguity that forms part of the "indeterminacy" of a contemporary sublime (Derrida 1978; Lyotard 1984).

Hütte studied at the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf from 1973 to 1981, during the professorship of Bernd Becher (one half of a famous photographic collaboration with Hilla Becher<sup>35</sup>) in what is now generally known as the *Düsseldorf or Becher School* – its legacy is to be associated with a cool, detached and rigorously neutral mode of representation. A mode that sought to document as objectively as possible real places, structures and people; that sought to make a virtue of the fundamental attributes of the indexical image. At the same time this was underscored by a more conceptual approach than was generally the case for photography during this period.

This is an important aspect of the heritage of Axel Hütte who is widely understood to be a graduate of this approach – he emerged as one of a small handful of photographers who have carried the reputation of the Bechers' project forward into the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, as already demonstrated, Hütte has firmly played down this legacy. I will suggest that it would be more fruitful to relate Hütte's aims to some of those that have occupied Gerhard Richter over a long career, for it is possible to identify approaches in Hütte's work that parallel those of Richter. However, I will conclude that in-so-far-as Hütte has been concerned with exploring the artistic possibilities and limitations of the indexical image then it remains useful to consider his work in relation to those interests pursued by the Bechers at Düsseldorf. However, what is *really* at stake here is the problem of interpretation and the experience of the work of art. At the heart of Hütte's practice, over several decades, has been a line of enquiry that explores the possibility of producing art that encourages a mode of engagement by the viewer that is not based upon interpretation either through a reading of cultural narratives or through an identification with the work's 'meaning' (a word that I employ in the loosest possible way) in terms of either personal concerns or external issues. I aim to show that Hütte aspires to make photographic work that grounds the viewer in the present. To this extent his work can be fruitfully related to the practice and ideas of Barnett Newman (*The Sublime is Now*, 1948) and other Abstract Expressionist painters of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and importantly to Lyotard's ideas of an "immanent sublime" (Lyotard 1982: 64-69).

Hütte began with a diverse range of subjects, but by the mid-1980s he had become increasingly committed to landscape. However, as often as Hütte's work is discussed in terms that relate to the legacy of his time at Düsseldorf, it is also discussed in relation to the German Romantic tradition and associated

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**35** | Née Wobeser. The Bechers, who had both been students at the Kunstakademie, began to collaborate as photographers in 1959 and were married in 1961. They developed a systematic approach to photographic work that informed Bernd Becher's teaching at the academy (1976-1996). It is this life-long collaboration that has led to the epithet the 'Becher' School of Photography.

with the Sublime aesthetic of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) and other German painters working in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gronert 2009; Steininger 2015: 22). An aesthetic vocabulary that is concerned with the emotive, subjective, spiritual (Rosenblum 1975), phenomenological – even visceral experience of art and nature. Therefore, a somewhat paradoxical interpretation emerges – at one and the same time Hütte’s work is understood in relation to the cool, detached and rigorously neutral style and approach of Düsseldorf, while parallels with a very different tradition are invoked – that of the heady, emotive, and palpably present aesthetic of sublime and Romantic painting. In the accounts that follow later in this discussion, I show the restless to-and-fro of efforts to describe, illuminate and anchor Hütte’s work – for there is an uneasy tension between these very different traditions, where the indexical and imaginative are counterpoised. Although, not so much of a ‘tension’ if we accept that the recourse to the legacy of the *Düsseldorf*, or *Becher, School* is itself founded on unsteady ground. However, it can be argued that such a tension has always existed within Western traditions of landscape art. I will return to this in a discussion of Constable and Turner where the interplay of the competing interests of topographical drawing and those more imaginative and expressive qualities associated with academic painting were themselves held in tension.

The effect on a viewer of Hütte’s work has often been compared to that of Friedrich; most notably, the sublime characteristics of pieces such as *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10)<sup>36</sup> and *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1819);<sup>37</sup> Stefan Gronert’s comment being representative of this when he suggests that: the “mists and clouds” that characterizes much of Hütte’s work are “doubtless allusions to Romantic landscape painting” (2009: 30). The designation as Sublime afforded to Hütte’s work is based upon a range of factors – primarily their sheer physical scale and material presence, such that Maren Polte suggests they are “overwhelmingly aesthetic through size” (Polte 2017: 95). However, the designation is also due to the artist’s preference for large-format photography with its imposing level of detail, combined with the sometimes extraordinary nature of its subject matter – rarely seen examples of geomorphology and patiently awaited weather conditions, that loosely reference traditional Romantic landscape painting. These are typically shot from carefully selected, pulled-back vantage points that disturb or *irritate* the viewer (to draw on Hütte’s own term). From the late 1980s the scale of Hütte’s prints increased to widths of up to three metres, which together with their high production values creates a level of ‘optical

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**36** | German title: *Der Mönch am Meer*, oil on canvas in the collection of Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany.

**37** | Also known as *Wanderer above the Mist* and in German: *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, oil on canvas, in the collection of Kunsthalle Hamburg, Germany.

presence' that can register the altogether more emotional, bodily, even visceral responses that they appear to evoke (based on commentary about them).

It is often remarked that Hütte is very conscious of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of the sublime – which is, superficially at least, referenced through his repeated inclusion of 'fog'. However, it may be more fruitful to consider how this functions as a device to control the viewer's relationship to the image, for Hütte has firmly eschewed the notion that it is necessary to be familiar with such elements of Western art history in order to 'understand' his work. In fact he has developed his process for making photographs as a purposeful resistance to such a manner of 'reading' contemporary photography. Arguably the 'fog' is not so much a reference to this earlier tradition, nor is it employed simply as a marker of the particular meteorological or atmospheric conditions of the time and place the picture was taken, nor as another kind of sign, but rather he has selected and exploited such conditions as a compositional device effectively to flatten the images – for these photographs are composed in such a way as to resist the viewer's entry into the image world. As such, and despite their superficial similarity, they are not immersive in the way of traditional western art. I am interested in how Hütte employs mist, fog and similar devices and what they offer Hütte in terms of the role they play in the composition and the impact they have on the experience of the image. In other words I am interested in how these images function – in relation to the viewer and in relation to interpretation.

To begin to think about this it is necessary to consider how such pictures position the viewer. Traditional imagery in the West has been organized around established rules of perspective that effectively places the individual spectator centrally in relation to the image. Camera images reproduce this effect since the fundamentals of camera design follow the same principles as those historic drawing devices: the camera obscura and camera lucida. This pre-ordained viewing position produces a degree of control over the viewer, such that, through the organization of the picture surface, the image-maker can direct a particular kind of interpretation. As Liz Wells has argued, with its "emphasis on unique subjectivity ... [s]pectatorship becomes, in effect, a symbolic exercise of control – of mind over matter – articulated via the pleasures of contemplation" (Wells 2011: 5). Challenging this effect was at the heart of the Bechers' project at Düsseldorf. Following the approach begun with *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), they produced a fixed schema for standardizing their compositions for a given series of photographs – for example in their series *Typology of Coal Breakers* (1974). Their aim was to photograph their subjects with the maximum degree of objectivity where the "view through the lens was neutral, factual and frontal, devoid of subjectivity" (Steininger 2015: 22). The Bechers' interest in objectivity focused on undercutting the imposition of the 'all knowing' author on the viewer's interpretation. However, Hütte takes this

further and with increased emphasis. He is emphatically concerned with the moment of viewing – his approach foregrounds the subjectivity of the viewer.

To appreciate the degree to which this is particular to perhaps only a small number of current photographic artists, it is worth noting that other contemporary photography continues to follow Western traditions, employing devices and motifs that facilitate the viewer's passage into the image world. Bernhard Fuchs for example, another, albeit later, graduate of Düsseldorf, produced a body of work near to where he grew up in Austria – the series *Roads and Paths* (2009). In these images fog is depicted but does not obscure the path of a road or track travelling into the landscape behind – drawing the viewer into the image. Similar examples can be seen in another series: *Woodlands* (2014). The use of this kind of visual syntax is long established in western art – see Claude, Poussin and any number of Dutch painters from the 17<sup>th</sup> century or Gainsborough, Constable and Turner, where paths (in the sense of roads or tracks) or beams of light, draw the viewer into the image world. By contrast, Hütte's work does not welcome the viewer into the image along an accessible path, nor does it create familiarity with a given specified area in the manner provided by Fuchs, instead there is no fixed view or standpoint and, according to Stefan Gronert, the effect of Hütte's approach is that "viewers must continually adjust their perspective" (Gronert 2009: 30). He explains: "our gaze makes its way from a narrow foreground into the far distance, where it frequently comes to a dead end" (ibid). Examples of this can be seen from across his career in: *Island Fog, Iceland*, 2002; *Furka 11, Switzerland*, 1995, and in a series of photographs exhibited in 2010 and 2011 under the title *Towards the Wood*. Indeed, regardless of the subject matter, the majority of Hütte's work operates in a similar way. Elsewhere, Hütte uses comparable devices: for example, surface reflections on water can create a similar effect and in his nocturnal cityscapes such as those in the series *As Dark as Light*, 2001, and *After Midnight*, 2006, the pervading darkness suppresses both depth and detail. Each of these devices serve to obstruct the viewer's gaze into the deeper space of the image. In this sense it has more in common with the Abstract painting of Pollock, Rothko, Still and Newman than it does with traditional landscape imagery.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the mechanism, visually speaking they are not immersive images. Although, as the artist himself suggests, some of these operate differently – where it is possible to glimpse fragments of the landscape through "holes in the wall of fog" but where it becomes clear that much of what is invisible is present as 'realitas'" (Hütte 2009: 26).

Hütte has spoken publicly about his *modus operandi* many times but perhaps most usefully, for my purposes, during the above mentioned interview with Stephan Berg. What quickly emerges is his pursuit of an approach to pho-

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38 | Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clifford Still and Barnett Newman.

tographically derived image making that subverts the inclination to arrive at an interpretation based upon pre-existing understanding; in Hütte's own words making images – “that don't show the viewers anything that they might be able to decode in terms of cultural knowledge” (Berg 2009: 22). Working with ‘fragments’ Hütte builds images that “have been emptied” in order to force the viewer “to integrate their own imagination and experiences into them” (Berg 2009: 22). To this end all references to any specificity of place or time has been expunged. Hütte has himself drawn attention to this characteristic of his work, noting the “enigmatic nature of space”, which is “often coupled with the sensation of slowed time” – for example in his architectural works.<sup>39</sup> With this move Hütte encourages a rejection of traditional modes of engagement in pursuit of a different kind of response; that forsakes the employment of the single viewpoint typical of Western spatial perspective and reliance on established cultural narratives. Hütte explains that he found it “more interesting not to tell stories” (Berg 2009: 23) and importantly to avoid facilitating the “historical” ... “decoding logic” typically relied upon by the art-world, through which it proffers a starting point for discovering the ‘meaning’ of a given image. Hütte even suggests that it is this logic that explains the success of Jeff Wall, for it has provided a mode of access into ostensibly difficult work – perhaps rendering it palatable (Berg 2009: 23). In contrast, Hütte is not interested in providing any obvious route into his work. Instead, he makes things rather more difficult for both viewer and, interestingly, for himself – for the following reason: by virtue of its inherent indexicality, photography does not readily lend itself to the purely abstract. Where abstract painters can try to insist upon a non-interpretive form of engagement from the viewer, a photographer has to deal with the material world, making Hütte's aim of negating interpretation a genuine challenge. But Hütte has elected to negotiate this inherent characteristic, not to say ‘problem’, of photography, the ultimate of all indexical images, and perhaps it is true to say that it is this that forms the substance of his research. I will argue that in this he appears to be following Richter's example.

Hütte's development of this approach came together in a solo exhibition at the Waddington Galleries in 2009. *Out of Darkness* was accompanied by a catalogue of the same name and it is worth noting that, unusually for an exhibition catalogue, it contained no supporting essay or introduction – no explication in other words. Even the titles and other information were secreted at the end of the volume. In what I take to be a clear and purposeful move, this absence coheres with Hütte's fundamental aims; his declared interest in *not* showing the viewer how to ‘read’ his images was followed through in this catalogue. In a substantive way this approach continues the direction taken by Barnett

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**39** | Axel Hütte, Axel Hütte, *Fantasmie e realtà* exhibition review website, no page number, [28/11/2017] <http://www.itsliquid.com/axel-hutte-fantasmierealta.html>

Newman in 1948. In *The Sublime is Now* Newman declared that he was only concerned with “absolute emotions”. This constituted an appeal to be free to create “images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches” such as those drawn from Western European painting – which he dismissed as “obsolete” (Newman 1992: 171-173). He claimed the right of artists to be released from what he called the “impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth” (ibid). Newman, who aligned himself with other Abstract Expressionist painters, argued that he and others were creating abstract art “out of ourselves, out of our own feelings” by way of a materiality that was “real and concrete” (ibid). For Newman it was this palpable concreteness that could directly engage whoever occupied the position of viewer – so long as they were consciously engaged rather than elsewhere mentally, distracted by the habit of interpretation through recourse to established narratives. To this end Newman stated that he “became involved with making the viewer present” (Hess 1971: 74). To paraphrase Maria Lind on abstraction and the example of Frank Stella: “What you see is what you see.” The image [painting] “has become an object” (Lind 2013: 17). Robert Rosenblum’s 1961 essay *The Abstract Sublime* addressed the experience of such images, which he likened to a religious or spiritual feeling where “we”, the viewer, “can only submit to them as an act of faith and let ourselves be absorbed into their radiant depths”. As such, he argued, they operate in a comparable way to Friedrich’s *Monk* or similar works by Turner. However, he suggested a key difference: that in the case of an Abstract Expressionist: “we ourselves are the monk before the sea, standing silently and contemplatively before these huge and soundless pictures” (Morley 2010: 110).

Writing in response to Barnett Newman Jean-Francois Lyotard asks whether we are really to understand the sublime as “here and now” and concludes not: “it alludes to something that can’t be shown, or presented”, an idea that he points out he has borrowed from Kant, who used the term “*dargestellt*” (Lyotard 1984). Instead, he argued that the kind of time Newman alluded to was not that of the “present instant” but: “this ‘now’ is one of the temporal ‘ecstasies’ that has been analysed since Augustine’s day and particularly since Edmund Husserl” ... “it is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate” and finally “What we do not manage to formulate is that something happens” (ibid).

As has already been mooted, large-format photography produced in recent decades, such as that by Hütte, has been described as an object-based form, Michael Fried suggesting that as such and more than ever before – “issues concerning the relationship between the photograph and the viewer standing before it became crucial for photography” (Fried 2008: 169). In much the same way as with the canvasses of the Abstract Expressionist painters, these engage the viewer directly by virtue of their scale and very materiality – where the object/image is present with the viewer – and where this present-ness is the result



of a direct encounter with the work in its physical form. As Chevrier argues, unlike earlier forms, new modes of large-format photography are “not simple prints – loose handy sheets that can be framed for an exhibition then ... put back into boxes”, but rather they are “designed and produced for the wall, and in the observer they evoke an experience of confrontation” (Chevrier 2015: 21). As described above, Hütte pursues a range of approaches to produce work that is materially impressive and where time appears to be slowed down and any sense of space is indeterminate – the intention appears to be that this offers a viewer an opportunity to experience something directly. In this sense it can be argued that Hütte’s photographs operate simultaneously as both image and object.

What follows in this essay is a discussion that attempts to address the problem of framing for interpretation and to think about issues of photographic indexicality in relation to the ways that viewers’ experience new large-format landscape photography.

## **VIEWING AND INTERPRETATION**

As is well established, works of art are the product of the given culture in which they were made and the experience of viewing them occurs against the backdrop of the culture and context in which they are seen, which, to a greater or lesser extent, influences the response and how the work is understood (Berger 1972; Wolf 1981). In other words, the experience of art takes place through a cultural lens. This relatively straightforward idea can be summarized by the term “cultured seeing” (Wells 2011). That interpretation is an open and ongoing process is clear – works of art are interpreted and reinterpreted across shifts in time and place. It has been shown that the influence of the Bechers at Düsseldorf has dominated discussions of Hütte’s practice but that, in addition, it is habitually related to German and European Romantic painting of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is perhaps unsurprising that this longer history has itself been variously interpreted. To take the landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich as an example, as Dietmar Elger has pointed out, they “can be read as allegories of German national liberation from Napoleonic domination” (Elger 2009: 175), whereas for Robert Rosenblum they function through their affordance of a spiritual experience perhaps in the same way as works by Rothko – as an abstract sublime (Rosenblum 1975). Such references and interpretations potentially shape a viewer’s experience of a given artwork or artistic output.

Discussions of Axel Hütte’s artistic development rarely suggest the influence of Gerhard Richter, who was a Professor at the Kunstakademie from 1971, and who purportedly represents the “polar opposite” of the Bechers’ approach at Düsseldorf (Elger 2009: 191). For example, Stefan Gonert’s account, in *The Düsseldorf School of Photography* (2009), plays down Richter’s contribution and

impact. In a study that ranges over the course of more than three hundred pages, Richter is mentioned just twice and in the first instance only to explain that he will be “excluded” from the discussion; collapsing the complexity of his practice in the term “hybrid form”, by which Gonert appears to mean a style of painting that incorporates photographic representation (Gronert 2009: 15, 35). Yet, according to Günther Uecker, “the entire Becher class ... cannot be fully understood without considering the presence of Gerhard Richter at the academy” (Elger 2009: 191). Indeed, Hütte himself notes the influence of other tutors at the Kunstakademie – naming Richter as one among several. Hütte explained that it was like an art academy where philosophy was also a key element and – importantly – not at all like a typical photography school such as those in other parts of Germany at the time. Furthermore, he notes: the “work method wasn’t developed by Becher, but has a tradition in Germany that is associated with the New Objectivity movement” (Berg 2009: 9).

During the early stages and long into his career Richter often found himself defending painting as a medium, arguing that it continued to have currency in the postmodern context. He had similar trouble with landscape as a suitable genre for a so-called ‘serious’ artist to persist with – although he did persist and in 2011 published a lifetime’s work in *Gerhard Richter Landscapes* (Elger 2011). In a letter to Jean-Christophe Ammann<sup>40</sup> written little more than a decade after Rosenblum’s *Abstract Sublime*, which had concluded that “the disturbing heritage of the Romantics ...”, by which he meant the Northern Romantic Tradition, “... has not yet been exhausted”, Richter claimed that:

A painting by Caspar David Friedrich is not a thing of the past. ... if it is ‘good’ it concerns us – transcending ideology – as art that we ostentatiously defend (perceive, show, make). Therefore, ‘today,’ we can paint as Caspar David Friedrich did (Richter 1995: 81).

In other words, the experience of art exists in the present. Artists can continue to work in old forms and viewers can find it to be rewarding in the here and now. I suggest that this is highly relevant to this discussion of Hütte’s practice – his is an ostensibly traditional landscape mode but one that pushes at some of the challenges raised by the interplay of abstraction, photography as an indexical medium and Richter’s own explorations through landscape photo-painting. To compare the approach of these two artists, Richter’s early painted seascapes (c.1969) were often based on a combination of photographs where typically the sky from one time and place was almost seamlessly montaged with the sea from another. Disconcertingly, the body of water was sometimes even turned up-side-down. Richter’s practice was to utilize his own small printed

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**40** | Notable Swiss art historian, curator and supporter of Richter, Joseph Beuys and their contemporaries.

photographs taken on holidays and those drawn from popular culture: those “amateur family photos, those banal objects and snapshots” (Polte 2017: 69). Containing limited visual information, these were then worked-up into large paintings where the viewer is left to imagine the details that are missing. As has already been established, Hütte’s finished pieces begin as fragments of analogue photographs taken during trips to carefully selected locations – the fully realized images reveal no evidence of the specific time and place and the picture-space is compressed. But in contrast to Richter, Hütte’s raw materials are always his own and typically produced using a large-format plate camera and therefore contain extensive detail, particularly where the photographic conditions and viewpoints have been very carefully considered. In both cases, the original visual material may have been based in reality but the resulting scenes are not identifiable.

Engagement with manipulated and ambiguous landscapes like these demonstrates how we humans try hard to make sense of what we see.<sup>41</sup> For Richter the interpretation of ambiguous or abstracted images is clear:

The paintings take their meaning from the viewer’s wish to recognize something in them. Everywhere, they show similarities with real appearances, which somehow never allow themselves to come into focus (Richter 2009: 176, 179).

Similarly Dietmar Elger, Richter’s biographer, also notes their “indeterminacy” (Elger 2009: 175),<sup>42</sup> but suggests that Richter’s manipulated landscapes “prove how imperfect this process can be” by exposing the “intensity with which the viewer tries to establish the echo of a familiar representation, even in abstract structures” (Elger 2009: 176). Indeed, we are all familiar with those instances where viewers can find it hard to let go of accustomed ways of looking, continuing to draw upon conventional modes of interpretation – especially with regard to abstraction. An awareness of the effort involved in this informs Hütte’s approach to landscape work. Although Stefan Gronert doesn’t appear to sense a link with Richter’s work, he does appreciate a key element in how it functions when he suggests that Hütte’s nocturnal pictures emphasize “the medium of photography as subject matter” where it has been “taken to extremes”, making us “aware of our own urgent desire to see” (Gronert 2009: 30). But can this be all? It doesn’t seem nearly enough of an explanation of the work of either of these formidable artists. Richter suggested that while his own landscapes can be understood “as manifestations of private, hidden sensibilities”, in that they may be derived from his personal world, they live in the mind of the viewer on different terms (Elger 2009: 175). To this end from the outset Richter explored

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**41** | See for example Aumont, Jacques (1994).

**42** | Elger is a curator and Director of the Gerhard Richter Archive.

the place of the viewer through his practice.<sup>43</sup> Through experimentations with composition, he effectively positions and repositions the viewer and their perceived distance from the various objects or structures depicted in an attempt to side-step the action of classical perspective; wrong-footing the viewer (Elger 2009: 175). Therefore, despite the manifest similarities in the subject matter, such paintings do not have a “romantic basis” and are “far more sceptical and modern”, according to Elger (176). For Richter the crucial element for the viewer is not concerned with being able to “do a thing” – such as gauge distance within a landscape for example – rather it is “seeing” that is the “decisive act, and ultimately places the maker and the viewer on the same level” (Elger 2009: 175). The author is no longer concerned with providing a meaning for the reader to interpret. Moreover, Richter aimed to bring the genres of landscape and abstraction closer together, discerning no significant difference between them. Elger suggests that to this end Richter sought particular kinds of landscape photographs to form the basis of his paintings – ones that “transcend the time-bound, captured moment and avoid the anecdotal correctness of a specific situation” (274). As Richter explained – the landscapes that he chose to paint are “free of elements that could connect the subject to a certain place, time, event” and this is despite the fact that in most cases a precise title is given alongside the image – as for *Davos S.* or *Davos N.* (both 1981), for example. This is intended as something more than a depiction of place, as Elger explains: “the image transcends the knowable topography”. This avoidance of temporal and spatial specificity undermines the representational status of these works, making them available as sites of abstraction. However, Hütte has taken this further. Where Richter’s pictures are based upon evidently social landscapes in that they are not of “untouched regions” or the “fictive or idealized world view of the German Romantics”, Hütte often avoids social detail and his locations appear more unrecognizable and anonymous as a result – despite the fact that they may also carry titles that index specific places. Moreover, where Richter puts a distance between his initial, indexically derived visual model and the resultant image, through the use of paint, Hütte’s finished works hold on stubbornly to the originating material – making it all the more difficult to achieve the kind of response that is more usually the aspiration of artists working with pure abstraction. Richter seems cognizant of the fundamental advantage of using paint in this respect – from his perspective paintings offer a greater materiality than photography, arguing that “it has more reality than a photograph because a painting is more of an object in itself, because it’s visibly hand-painted, because it has been tangibly materially produced” (ibid).

In removing the temporal and spatial specificity of the pro-filmic events, both artists effectively undermine two of the key portals through which such

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**43** | That is, from the Corsica paintings made in 1968.

images are typically interpreted, and in-so-doing they encourage an experience in response to the very materiality of these artworks. Richter achieves this by minimizing detail through super-enlargement and through taking a soft brush across the surface to blur remaining detail at the end of the painting process. Hütte goes for something similar – by employing devices to flatten the image and occlude some visual information, he purposefully retains detail in places where it is possible to peek through the fog (or whatever) to glimpse at something beyond. In these ways Hütte attempts to achieve with an indexical image what would usually only be hoped for with a purely abstract image – an audacious aspiration to say the least. But in neither case does the artist entirely let go of the indexical information – and this is important to how these images (all images) function. In discussing Richter’s practices Paul Wood argued that: “Imaginative reflection upon the paintings operates under a dual aspect: the paintings as paintings *and* the paintings as models” ... “such looking is always embodied, and always discursive” (Wood 2009: 188). Wood insists on the simultaneous play of material presence and references to the external. Abstraction as a strategy attempts to expunge all references to the external in order to avoid the associative and interpretive modes of engagement of representational art. Richter’s conviction that the materiality of paint facilitates the viewer’s direct engagement, and his perception of no fundamental distinction between landscape and abstraction, have driven his experiments with technique and approaches to landscape over a period of more than three decades. But whereas for Richter, photographs function as a direct source for transcriptions into paint using an episcopo – Hütte is faced with the inherent detail and sheer quantity of visual information supplied by the large-format photographic image. For him the task of producing representational landscape images that do not behave as representations but instead enable a direct engagement with a material object (the final photograph) – and importantly – one that achieves a state of presence for the viewer, is all the more challenging.

## **INDEXICALITY – TOPOGRAPHY AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION**

However fake the subject, once photographed, it’s as good as real - Hiroshi Sugimoto (2005: 33).

From its earliest beginnings, discourses on photography have negotiated questions concerning the indexical nature of the photographic image, and these remain potent within discussions of contemporary practice, that is, in the age of the manipulated image. Central, are issues concerning the relationship to ‘truth’ and to ‘rank’. The status of the photograph in terms of reliability – the extent to which they are faithful to the pro-filmic event or expressive, creative

and encoded – and the impact this has on the viewing experience, are fundamental to the current discussion. But also of interest is the historic perception of photography as a ‘low’ form, due to its inherent nature as a ‘copy’, a characteristic that has been construed as ‘mindless’ – an idea rooted in academic art and famously articulated by Joshua Reynolds when he said: “The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it” (Reynolds 1987). This tradition asserts that only where the “exertion of mind” is evident can an image be assured of its status as art. Following this principle, for a photograph to be considered a ‘high’ form, something additional to, or other than, mere copying, must be discernible within it. Reynolds (writing before the advent of photography) was clear that creating “perfect form” in a work of art was achieved by “leaving out particularities, and retaining only general ideas”, a “principle” which he said should relate “to every part of the Art ... to Invention, to Composition, to Expression, and even to Colouring” (ibid).

While the indexical status of the photographic image is central to discourses on the medium, what is not so often considered is the possibility of indexical characteristics in a painted image. This is highly relevant to this discussion, because northern European landscape painting as an artistic genre has its origins in the studied recording through visualisation of scientific, topographical and archaeological discoveries, where the Netherlands is understood as the central locus of this inclination – described by Svetlana Alpers as “the mapping impulse” (Alpers 1983: 124). For example, Britain was strongly influenced by this practice, where from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century a “thriving tradition of documentary landscape” had been established (Wilton 2014: 79). Much of this activity was associated with the emergence, for the first time, of organized support for scientific endeavour and historical research in the form of societies such as the Royal Society (1660) and the Society of Antiquaries (1717), who commissioned artists to document their findings. Views were produced both for “information” and “for the sheer pleasure of ... contemplation” (ibid), until, as Andrew Wilton explains, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the topographical view, particularly in watercolour, “had developed into a sophisticated art form, capable of a great range of expression” (Wilton 2014: 79). Some artists remained committed to the “clarity and precision” of the Dutch example, for others, however, this fed into the development of a more subjective form – a new romanticism that, to a greater or lesser extent, abandoned the topographic document preferring a schema of simplified elements with which to compose their landscape images. In some cases novel methods were devised for arriving at compositions. In one example, the prominent and influential artist Alexander Cozens encouraged the strategy of making random marks with ink on crumpled paper that would then be developed into a ‘landscape’ image. Similarly, Thomas Gainsborough, although an avid walker in the countryside around his home, nevertheless com-

posed his landscapes on a table-top using props such as pieces of moss and foliage, sponge, stones and even a model horse. There is, therefore, an inherent contradiction in the register of this practice – the form originally prized for its veracity developed into a vehicle of expression, appreciated for its potential to evoke sentiment, values and ideals.

It seems that in pursuit of a new and vital visual language, artists were willing to experiment – whether with the more familiar techniques of drawing and painting or through exploiting more serendipitous approaches. But in certain cases this was also in order to assert their sense of the rightful status of landscape as a genre – by the addition of something evidently inventive and creative. However, it is possible to argue that the most successful and enduring work was by those who continued to root their practice in the direct experience of real places – such that both the place and the experience of that place was represented – notwithstanding that one was an attempt to record *terra firma* whilst the other was concerned with emoting illusive sensation. With respect to these painters (I am thinking here primarily of Constable and Turner) it seems clear that both objective and subjective elements were sought. The technical and emotional held in balance and tension – where the subjective register was in some important ways dependent for its effects on the visual record achieved through the careful study and diligence by the artists concerned. Also clear is that the traditions of both north and south were present in much of this work. While British painters admired and emulated the topographical approaches of Dutch art and the northern tradition more generally, the influence of the romantic south was also in play and formed the backbone of Academic painting. The paradox that is present in Hütte's work – the restrained and factual counterpoised with the imaginative and creative – is evident in the very origins of northern European landscape art. This discussion now turns to whether particular approaches to landscape painting (though not all approaches) can be legitimately described as possessing indexical characteristics on this basis.

During the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Constable, and then Turner – in different ways and to differing degrees – pursued approaches to landscape painting that sought out the 'truth' in what they saw and felt. Constable eschewed the classical and the learned in favour of something more 'natural', Turner, on the other hand, consciously attempted to bring topographical elements into his work while also pursuing the aesthetic standards suggested by the academy. For Constable this meant the habitual study of the effects of weather, from direct and careful observation of the skies above rural East Anglia, typically near to home. These were captured primarily through sketching in oils and with a diligence more familiar to scientific approaches to recording evidence. Long after his death, in the modern period, these studies established Constable's lasting reputation. His interest in naturalism was rooted in several factors – one being a preference for the early work of Thomas Gainsborough, the

latter having in turn been influenced by 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch landscape painting. Dutch painters were understood to have worked close to home and to have been relatively unaffected by the discoveries and mythologies of the classical world with its hold on painters in southern Europe. Constable was disinclined to follow the example of academic painting. He was self-taught to a significant extent and extremely well read. He did not feel the need to follow where the academy led and could therefore read the various art treatise of the day critically, selecting only those influences that suited his own inclinations. Like many around him, Constable valued the close study of nature but where others used this as a point of departure, preferring, as Gilpin maintained, to “correct” nature in order “to produce a harmonious whole” (Kitson 1991: 12), Constable, Michael Kitson argues, was more inclined to celebrate the “apparent randomness of nature” (ibid). He emerged as an artist with a strong commitment to the direct encounter with the ever-changing appearance of the world he inhabited, the study of which formed the basis of the preliminary work for all his major paintings. However, Kitson speculates that Constable’s pursuit of “truth” – the artist’s preferred term for his working practice of drawing from nature – was motivated by the “political, moral and religious as well as aesthetic” (ibid). In other words, although anchored in the ‘real’ and founded on a belief that his approach was “legitimate, scientific, mechanical”, Constable’s landscapes had things to say (Moore 2015: 60). Ray Lambert takes this further, in refuting what he takes to be the “myth” of Constable’s naturalism, he argues that a “picture is a fictive version of a perceivable world” for which the “representational artist” must “select which recognisable things to include ... and how to put them together into a coherent whole” (Lambert 2005: 19).

In Turner’s case the pursuit of ‘truth’ was through a process of negotiating and refining the factual characteristics of the topographical landscape image, bringing them together with creative or expressive responses to the places he painted, away from home in locations across Britain and Europe. Despite the artist’s known admiration of Claude and Poussin et al and his reputation for expressive painting, Turner imposed on himself a challenge that his work should demonstrate his equal command of these two competing interests: the factual and expressive. Wilton argues that his aim was to produce a “vividly accurate presentation of atmospheric effects: he chose to be accurate in his depiction of light and air rather than simply the physical objects in the scene” (Wilton 2014: 83), and to achieve this he developed a very free approach to the handling of paint, for which he was criticized in his day. Wilton claims that Turner’s “ambition was huge” in pursuing two different modes within his career – as a skilled producer of topographical watercolours and as a history, landscape and seascape painter with the highest of reputations within the academy (ibid). So, while very different painters in many ways, like Constable, Turner kept faith with a perceived need to anchor his expression in the real, stating:



however arduous, however depressing the subject may prove; however trite, complex or indefinite ... however trammelled with the turgid and too often repelling recurrence of mechanical rules, yet those duties must be pursued (Wilton 2006: 6).

However, it is perhaps obvious that no matter how dedicated these artists were to an idea of naturalism or ‘truth’, Lambert’s point is compelling, and one that undercuts any claim to the indexicality of a sketch made through the direct observation of nature. An approach suggested by Richard Shiff is useful in negotiating these concerns regarding the indexical aspects of images. Shiff proposed the notion of the “proper” image as one that is sanctioned by convention and generally relatively factual – in our case the topographical drawing. Relative to this, the more imaginative elements of a representation are, again using Shiff’s term, “figured” (Shiff 1989). In this way the creative, expressive, “figured” characteristics of landscape images are evident precisely because of their divergence from their conventionally factual, “proper” counterpart. Constable and Turner’s studies from observed reality emulate the “proper” approach of the topographical artist while the techniques they used to represent the sensual or phenomenological experience, or to flag their more ideological interests, constitute the “figured”. This has the further effect of elevating their final paintings into a ‘higher’ realm, according to the standards of academic art.

This discussion will now consider whether it is legitimate to claim that the creative aims of Constable and Turner in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century parallel those of landscape photography in the age of the manipulated image. After all, technically speaking, photographers now have the facility to shape creatively their images to an unprecedented degree, while at the same time the raw materials for this remains indexical. That Hütte creates photographs using indexical material and yet purposefully avoids, obscures or removes particular kinds of recognisable visual information, is interesting. In spite of their apparent objectivity, his work has moved beyond the “proper” to the “figured”. Through enhancement of the merely factual Hütte has elevated his work – in Reynolds’s terms, he has pursued “perfect form” through “leaving out particularities, and retaining only general ideas” (Reynolds 1987). Specifically, the discussion will explore the role played by so-called ‘truthful’ or ‘factual’ elements of landscape images with regard to the experience of viewing, and speculate on the extent to which the viewer seeks evidence that the image of a landscape is based in reality – whether topographical reality or experiential reality. Indeed, an entire mythology has developed around Turner’s painting as a conduit to a real experience, the famous example being his seascape *Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth* (exhibited 1848). It was purportedly based on Turner’s own direct encounter with the ferocity of that storm as witnessed from the precarious vantage point of a crow’s nest. While the account is unlikely to be true it persists in the imagination of viewers and the “story has endured as a way of demon-

strating Turner's full-blooded engagement with the world around him."<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, it is suggested that Constable's sky studies became so highly valued because they speak to an authenticity – the painter/author was *there* – and that this is instrumental to his large-scale fully realized paintings. It would seem that for some viewer's at least, knowledge of the image as representative of a real experience contributes something to the experience of the painting itself. In other words – both the factual and the imaginative seem to facilitate effective engagement for the viewer. This is perhaps in the same manner suggested by Barthes in his discussions of the mechanism by which 'realism' operates – allowing the ideological messages, embedded in these images, to slip through. However, John Walsh voiced a note of caution regarding the supposed accuracy of the skies in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch landscape painting. Through careful analysis and the help of a meteorologist he was able to demonstrate that whilst the representations of specific cloud types could be "subtly rendered" they were selected from a "relatively narrow choice of situations" – leaving most "weather conditions unrepresented". He concludes that the "intention was not so much to describe nature as to exemplify it" (Walsh 1987: 96). Like the Dutch before them, Constable and Turner selected from the sights and experiences of real places in order to make their art. Hütte is also selective – taking extraordinary care with identifying specific places, times, conditions of light, weather and viewpoints – his working method is designed to capture large amounts of visual data, however, his choices are made to suit his own purposes and therefore (even leaving aside adjustments in postproduction) cannot be understood as 'truthful', despite their apparent indexicality.

In recent decades the walking artist Hamish Fulton, has attracted attention with regard to similar issues. According to Jean-Francois Chevrier, Fulton's work could be described as "objects of thoughts", by which he suggests that such images collect and store information about, and experience of, the place walked (2015: 24). To be clear, since 1972 Fulton has only made work in direct response to his experience of undertaking daily walks, of varying durations and in diverse landscapes. He represents some of the visual elements of such experience through black and white photographs and wider experience is captured through short pieces of descriptive text and other written information. In this way the work is the product of a physical, as well as mental, experience of walking in rural and remote places. The resulting artworks are indexical in that sense. Arguably, no less than Constable's direct study of the skies above East Anglia or Turner's experience of the snowstorm (if it were true!). Indeed, Florian Steininger suggested that some of Fulton's photographs – namely his series

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**44** | Gallery label, February 2004 from Tate Britain Display Caption from online catalogue <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-snow-storm-steam-boat-off-a-har-bours-mouth-n00530> accessed 06-09-17

*Alaska I-VI* (1977) “become sublime places in spite of the factual topography” (Steininger 2015: 22). Yet this seems to overlook the long established conviction, amongst commentators of the sublime, that sublime experience can more readily be a response to the real as well as to dramatically heightened representation. For this reason, indexical and factual elements of an image may act as a prompt to a sublime response, which Derrida suggested are: “encountered in art less easily ... more easily in raw nature... There can be sublime in art if it is submitted to the conditions of ‘an accord with nature’” (Derrida 1978: 127).

Interestingly, Fulton has pursued walking as a strategy for discovering a fresh way of making art. He explains: “you enter an uncharted world, because if you say you want to make art about walking, then it’s wide open – it’s not like abstract painting, which has a history” (Sooke 2012). This is instructive. While Hütte’s choice of aesthetic language leaves him with the problem of the obvious similarities with earlier conventions of western landscape painting and is focused on trying to side-step them through compositional strategies, Fulton avoids this problem altogether, by literally breaking new ground.

## VIEWER’S RESPONSES

To restate the claims posed in the introduction: Hütte sought to remove the visual indicators that might point to ways that his landscape photographs could be read. This situation leads me to an obvious line of enquiry. Given that the work has been purposefully stripped of readily identifiable ‘*meaning*’, where ‘readers’ are encouraged to become ‘writers’ (Barthes 1977), the following will consider a range of accounts and interpretations within numerous critical and popular reviews of his work, the purpose of which is to find out what is said when nothing is said, when the work is ‘mute’ (Rosler 1994). What follows is a consideration of the reception of Axel Hütte’s landscape photography, with its inherent paradox – the objective versus the imaginative – firmly in mind. It explores the terms upon which Hütte’s works are experienced and valued by their viewers.

From fairly early on Hütte’s attempt to reposition the viewer (in relation to that encouraged through a classic Western perspective) appears to have been noticed by commentators although not always understood. It is often pointed out that Hütte is the traveller of his generation of Düsseldorf photographers and this seems to create an expectation that his work addresses the direct experience of a given place and that the aim is to provide the viewer with an experience that approximates the real thing: a sense of place, a specific place. The degree to which pleasure or satisfaction is achieved is of course partially dependent upon the interests prioritized by the given spectator. In the following case the viewer appears to want information. Emma Braso considers Hütte’s

2011 work *Rheingau* (then on show in Helga de Alvear, Madrid), first explaining that *Rheingau* is a wine region on the banks of the Rhine, brim full of historic buildings, where Hütte retraced places where one of his predecessors from New Objectivity, Albert Renger-Patzsch, had taken photographs 60 years previously. However, finding only the suggestion of the *essence* of the place, it is with unveiled disappointment that Braso declares:

The truth is that these pictures look very similar to many others he has previously taken in natural landscapes in distant places like the Canary Islands, New Mexico or Venezuela, and reveal very little about Rheingau itself or the way its representation has evolved (Braso 2011: 105).

However, Lisa Ortner-Kreil suggests that Hütte is “not interested in documenting, but ... in aesthetic reception; photography serves him as a means of visualizing and conveying natural phenomena to the senses.” (in: Brugger & Steininger [eds.] 2015) Whereas, the very characteristic that Braso takes to be a weakness appears to have intrigued another writer: “One may never have actually visited any of his locations but they do appear peculiarly familiar” (Gregos 1996).

Katerina Gregos (1996) notes that “All details in the picture space are rendered with alarming equality”, achieving an effect where “no part of it appears more important than another”. Furthermore, avoiding elements of “anecdote and narration” also contributes to the “neutral pictorial space that encourages a sense of individual empathy” (ibid). However, noting the use of a particular approach to the organization of the picture space is an observation of a different order to the notion that the employment of such “compositional and structural devices” creates “an intense atmosphere” capable of evoking feelings such as “solitude and loneliness” – since the first describes a formal approach and the second the resulting experience for the given viewer (ibid). In other words the perception of intensity, solitude and loneliness must surely reside in the interpretive capacity afforded at least in part by the viewer’s individual psychology and experience. In other words Gregos’ review begins with the general but ends on what must be her own individual experience. Some reviewers focus on Hütte’s approach or strategy (and this largely becomes the interpretation), while others centre their discussion on possible responses to the resulting images. A reviewer in *fotografia magazine* attempts to bring the two together, finding that the flattened picture space makes it “almost impossible” to read spatially, s/he describes Hütte’s landscapes as “awe-inspiring” and suggests they aim to prompt an imaginative response through their large scale and “detached, unemotional” aesthetic language. This, they suggest, has the effect of throwing the “mysterious, even intimidating majesty of nature in the observer’s face”, which serves to “trigger experiential, visionary leaps” (the language of the sublime) where engagement with the image becomes “an experiment in

perception and its limitations” (2014). Indeed, the idea that the nature of the photographic image, in relation to the human urge to make sense of what is seen, has itself become the ‘subject’ of these images appears to be widespread. This is frequently taken to be at the heart of Hütte’s project and viewers appear to have a sense that they are being invited to notice what the medium does to their experience of seeing and perception. The following reviewer finds that the ‘light’ in *Fantasmie e Realtà* (Venice 2014) guides the viewer into a conscious awareness of the viewing process, while they are simultaneously “capable of wandering freely through the fantasies of the imagination”, bouncing them into adopting “a conscious and not passive approach” (Fondazione Bevilacqua 2014) .

Many commentators centre their discussion on what they take to be the large scale, imposing detail and high production values of Hütte’s landscape photographs – leading Maren Polte to note the way that the “resulting power of suggestion and illusion” can “physically incorporate the observer” (Polte 2017: 95). For many this seems to affect a response where the viewer explores their own internal world or reflects upon other things. For such viewers these landscape images have “a very ambiguous kind of natural beauty” (Gronert 2009: 30) that affords them the space for contemplation and reflection. In this example the viewer experiences an opportunity to go “on a journey deep within themselves, discovering their inner emotions rather than being guided by the photographer’s intentions”, believing that the artist remains at a distance and that it is the artwork itself that takes them “on a trip of learning about themselves.” (Widewalls 2016)

What interests me here is that these accounts reference the indexical in terms of lack – in that they don’t mention the visual detail when it is apparent – only when there appears to be an absence of specific information. But how such lack is understood by different viewers, varies. Broadly speaking there are two camps, both of which echo two earlier debates regarding the topographical and the imaginative. One speaks to a disappointment when a palpable evocation of place seems absent. While, conversely, the other understands the absence as a potential for a different quality of engagement; a space for contemplation, for presence. The range of responses described also inhabit a duality with regard to internal and external triggers for aesthetic experience – along the lines debated over in theories of the sublime. Internal and external prompts can lead to sublime experience and the above accounts can be understood in these terms also.

From the outset my trajectory has been bent on exploring the terms upon which new large-format landscape photography is understood, experienced and appreciated. Taking Axel Hütte as an example has enabled me to think about the role of the indexical and the expressive for contemporary work in this genre. Maren Polte pointed out in 2012 that Hütte’s work has not yet been theorized to a significant degree – “there have been phenomenological descriptions ...

though the theoretical analysis of his evolution has yet to materialize” (Irrek 1996: 75-77; Polte 2017: 14). Yet all other Becher students, of Hütte’s generation, have – so why is this – why the scant critical engagement? On what basis does this difficulty arise?

## TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

In 2011 *Professional Photographer* magazine put forward the theory that the Düsseldorf School had effectively killed off photography, arguing that the work of the group leaves the observer cold, that it presents no opinion, no personality.<sup>45</sup> If only it were that simple. For Axel Hütte, as for any artist working in the realm of abstraction, the aim of grounding the viewer in a present is challenging – as this discussion has suggested, the more so working as he does *with* indexical raw material and *against* the inherent, powerful inclination of the human perceptive organ to make sense of what is seen. With contemporary practice we expect art to make demands on us as participants rather than spectators – to follow Barthes’ assertion, we relish the pleasures of consumption (Barthes 1977). If the aim of such work as Hütte’s is to create time and space for contemplation and for “immanent sublime” experience, then it is prudent to consider as Lyotard did – what happens if nothing happens? (Lyotard 1984).

There is a telling parallel here between the illusive ‘meaning’ of these photographs and examples of Abstract Expressionism of the late 1950s. In Hütte’s case, work that purposefully removes reference points, motivated by his desire to put the business of making the encounter ‘meaningful’ firmly in the hands of the viewer, as compared with the earlier movement’s emphasis on the personally derived expression of the artists concerned. However, recalling the problem of Abstract Expressionism for the frustrated younger generation of American artists that came after the likes of Pollock and Rothko – such work was ‘in fact mute’ (Rosler 1994). As is well documented, it was frustrations such as this that spurred the move away from expressive art and fuelled the further development of conceptual and critically engaged art. And it was a moment for democratizing access to art and in actively involving the viewer in the production of meaning. That Hütte has carefully considered the viewer and foregrounded the moment of viewing in the production of his landscape photography, is evident. But how/where has the viewer been positioned in all of this? Not only in relation to Hütte’s work but to any art where ambiguity stands in for subject matter. Inevitably, where ambiguity is pursued as a strategy there is potential for vacuity – although well intentioned the emphasis on the view-

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**45** | See case re accusation from Grant Scott (Editor) – <http://theculturetrip.com/europe/germany/articles/the-dusseldorf-school-10-things-you-should-know/>

ers' participation could leave some art hollow – devoid as it is of meaning and intention. If this particular body of work by Hütte has simply been reduced to a study of the tension between meaning and ambiguity or an opportunity for a viewer to consider their own processes of perception, then perhaps it does leave itself open to accusations of vacuity. If a 'work' of art, in Barthes' sense, becomes a 'text' only at the moment of viewer engagement and through the activity of the production of meaning – then, in the presence of the absence of meaningful content, the only production that can take place must be derived from the viewer themselves.

What I am getting at here is to question whether in the post Benjamin/Barthes period (*Birth of the Reader*) – it is possible that interpretation has been left so open that some work – in its efforts to free the viewer – is in danger of having nothing to say. Rather than being a container brimming full of potential it threatens to become an empty vessel: a 'chocolate box' art – too easily accessible, too undemanding, in danger of co-option into the merely decorative or of becoming domesticated – brought into close proximity through a variety of visual applications; repurposed and reabsorbed into mainstream commercial uses such as those found in the advertising of outdoor leisure wear and even in cookery books (Nilsson 2015). I feel bound to question whether there is sufficient discernible difference between the work of this supposed 'high' form of photography produced by Hütte and 'lower' forms of illustrative and fictive landscape photography produced and functioning within the commercial world.

Working from the 1960s onwards, in a context where so-called 'serious' art equated with conceptual art, Richter, somewhat defiantly, painted images that were visually pleasing. But doing so, Elger argues, "did in effect politicize them – precisely because they were so blatantly apolitical, uncritical, and timeless in sentiment" (Elger 2009: 273). And the only explanation that Richter offered was "I felt like painting something beautiful" (*ibid*).

It is perhaps unsurprising that during the maelstrom of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century western art some artists, in a challenge to Expressionism, articulated the idea that art needed to be conducted on different terms. In the visual arts those who became known as Minimalists established a mode of art that rejected the personal expression of the artist, instead foregrounding the phenomenological experience of the viewer as active participant; while composer John Cage asserted his preference for saying "nothing"; and conceptual artist John Baldessari toyed with voiding his work of meaning with his paradoxical written statements that sought to deny the ideas they were exploring. Indeed, both Cage and Baldessari, each in their different ways, invoked a paradox – doing so in an unambiguous way by literally spelling it out: "I have nothing to say and I'm saying it" (Cage 1949); "No ideas have entered this work" (Baldessari 1966-67). Hütte's work is more ambiguous – working in a landscape mode that is immediately

recognizable a viewer might look for ‘meaning’ or might seek ‘presence’ – but find that nothing comes.

Is it possible to suggest that such ‘muteness’ in the face of environmental catastrophe is an abdication of responsibility in Rosler’s terms? As depoliticized speech – where history and context is avoided in favour of depicting pristine places. His predecessors, the Bechers, were notable participants in the *New Topographics* project of 1973 – however, Hütte typically avoids the central theme of this project the “*Man-altered Landscape*”.<sup>46</sup> Instead, his work appears to seek out the apparently untouched places of remote regions. Can he be asking that we question the status of the apparent absence of human alteration? If so, can it be argued that the difficulty of the work and the utopian possibility that it offers – does potentially invite/elicit a meaningful critical engagement with the circumstances of 21<sup>st</sup> century global crisis? If so there is scant evidence that this is how viewers do understand his work.

This discussion has attempted to consider how these images are actually experienced and to identify what viewers appear to be looking for and to speculate on what they appear to offer the viewer: a vicarious experience of places and spaces that are out of their reach but desired in some way? And if so in what is the desire rooted and what appears to satisfy this – faithful, factual depictions and documentary images – or images that are expressive in some way of the author, or the author’s experience? The outcome of this investigation points to works of art that bring the two together – the figured and the proper.

Axel Hütte’s work operates at the axis of indexicality/abstraction – his process appears to ‘play’/balance on this knife-edge. His work bears an ostensible familiarity – it looks like somewhere – yet the visual language used by this artist renders it impossible to determine precisely where, or for that matter, precisely when it was taken. Therefore, despite the place names ascribed to the works, Hütte’s landscape photographs can seem less than precise. As already shown, some viewers (Braso 2011) clearly feel let down by the effect that the absence of specificity in the work has on their viewing experience – apparently frustrated that artwork that purportedly took a precise place as its starting point only found what could equally be found in any other place. With no obvious sign of the artist’s direct experience of place, the indexicality of the work is questioned and appears to undermine this particular viewer’s satisfaction with it. And my digression into a discussion about 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape painting was an attempt to consider the role of the ostensibly factual in the aesthetic/sublime experience of the viewer, where they appeared to be seeking both: “information” and “the sheer pleasure of ... contemplation” (Wilton 2014: 79).

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**46** | *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (1975) exhibition at George Eastman House, Rochester, NY, October.



Lyotard argued that with the advent of photography “the idea of the industrial readymade had arrived”, putting painters into a new and challenging position where, he suggests, painting “became a philosophical activity”. If we are willing to think about the activity of new photography in a similar way – where some new photographers are behaving more like painters – then this too can be thought of as a “philosophical activity” (Lyotard 1982: 64-69). Lyotard concludes with a statement that serves my argument about the activity of Hütte well:

The governing principle of the post-industrial techno-scientific world is not the need to represent the representable, but rather the opposite principle. ... The spirit of the times is surely not that of the merely pleasant: its mission remains that of the immanent sublime, that of alluding to the nondemonstratable (ibid).

But Lyotard is clear that it is, at the same time, not the job of the artist to explain their work to viewers – instead he says: “The responsibility of communicating the meaning of thoughts and paintings belongs to the intellectual” (ibid). For Lyotard understands artists as: “his brothers and sisters in experimentation” (ibid). It seems to me that Hütte works very much in the realms of experimentation and philosophy where he rightly follows this principle of not explaining his work. My only fear is that the ostensible simplicity of some of his landscape photographs means that his work can be construed as the “merely pleasant”. Perhaps unhelpfully in suggesting this, I am alluding to a potential problem without offering a solution. I guess this is simply a risk that Hütte is willing to take.

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