

The Anthropocene Sublime: Justin Guariglia's Artwork

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In August 2016, geologists officially suggested renaming the present geological epoch the Anthropocene—anthropos meaning “human” and cene “new” -- citing human activity’s role in irreversible species loss, accelerated consumption and population growth, pollution, technological development and most notably climate change. The Anthropocene may not be the end of the world, but it marks a point of no return. As we look on with arrogant denial or idle alarm, humanity is exiting the safe operating space of the Holocene, the geological epoch which saw the emergence of everything we have come to call civilization.

Yet this disruption remains uncannily abstract. All we have are graphs of global temperatures, numbers representing changing patterns of atmospheric flux, ocean acidification or rising levels of greenhouse gases. While the past years have been the warmest since the beginning of recorded global temperatures, it nevertheless remains hard to experience climate change unless you are an Inuit, farmer, winemaker, or NASA scientist investigating the slow disintegration of the polar ice caps. It is hard to observe species loss. It is impossible to sense rising levels of CO₂ or the acidification of the oceans. The uncanny thing about the Anthropocene is that its vastness and complexity exceeds our ways of experiencing and comprehending. Nevertheless, it marks the end of nature as an immutable background to human history.

Nature is no longer natural. As we become aware that we live in a more and more damaged world, we realize that the human-built, technological and medial environments which surround us blend increasingly with what was once called the “natural environment”. With global climate change, there is no single place on Earth that is not affected by human interference. The “wild” has vanished.
[Image 1: *Öbür I Interference*]

Defying perception, the environmental disruption of the Anthropocene calls all the more for the creation of evidence, of perceptibility, of documentation. How can we start to sense what we only know in the abstract? As the current transformation of the earth’s life system is both massive and imperceptible, happening in an incremental yet accelerating manner, we need images to render the imperceptible visible, narratives to give it a story. Art, in the modern age, has traditionally assumed the role of representing the unrepresentable. Today, we demand of art to do more than depict nature as a world “out there”, an external object of aesthetic reflection. Today, nature must be conceived of as a fragile, fleeting entity, subject to what the journalist Thomas Friedman has called “global weirding” – not just “global warming” but a transformation and distortion of just about everything we used to call “natural”. This implies that representation must constantly address its own limits, that which cannot be represented as it happens too slowly or too fast to be experienced by human understanding.

Traditionally, photography has been a privileged medium for tackling this paradox. Being a “trace of light”, giving account of something that has really “been there”, as Roland Barthes famously pointed out, photography has often been seen as a body of evidence, as a possibility of making things visible that may not be visible to the naked eye. This is why the photography of landscapes has become one of the most important media to address the transformation of our life-world in the Anthropocene. However, the landscapes in question are no longer picturesque reflections of natural beauty or pristine grandeur.

Landscapes presented by photographers such as Edward Burtynsky, David Maisel, Justin Guariglia, and, in a different vein, even Andreas Gursky, are, as Foucault would have it, "heterotopias", spaces that are changing or changed in a complicated way, far-away, hidden, poisoned, destroyed, forgotten, reconstructed, re-shaped by human force. Photography bears witness to this global weirding, the unforeseen transformation of the entire world by human force.

One of the core tenets of the Anthropocene is the discovery that humankind has become a geological agent, comparable to the mighty forces of cyanobacteria, volcano eruptions or plate tectonics. Facing the Anthropocene – politically, philosophically, or aesthetically – means to conceive of both the force of human agency, and the human inability to control the effects and consequences of this agency. How can we reflect on this paradox? How can it translate into aesthetic representation?

The classical mode of dealing with this paradox of power and powerlessness, of pleasure and terror, reflexivity and shock, has been, since the 18th century, the sublime. The aesthetics of the sublime is about observing phenomena of violent destruction and overwhelming force. [Image Glacial Facade Study III] The overwhelming character of the sublime spectacle can be based on its immense scale or on its violence and force – making the observer feel infinitely small or weak in comparison. Traditionally nature was a favorite subject of an aesthetics of the sublime: the awe inspired by huge mountains, thunderstorms, the storm-swept sea, or natural disasters is the classical example in many treatises on the sublime. In the modern age, technology itself has become a powerful source of the sublime, be it the mighty architecture of bridges or power plants or the toxic brightness of the nuclear explosion. Yet, the observer typically experiences a sublime spectacle from a safe distance, and this experience is about relishing the horror or overwhelming intensity of the scene, as well as the pleasure of being able to perceive and reflect upon it. It calls for both emotional shock and for rational reflection.

What might an aesthetics of the sublime attuned to the Anthropocene be? It implies both the distance of the observer's point of view and the immediacy of being confronted with changes in the world which exceed our capacity of perception and comprehension. Its most emblematic visual paradigm may in fact be the gaze of aerial photography. Capturing the scope and scale of environmental destruction from high above, the photographer's distanced gaze is able to give visibility to as elusive a phenomenon as climate change or massive pollution. By emphasizing the immense scale of disruption, the gaze from above paradoxically can produce an image whose uncanny beauty conveys an immediacy which speaks to the affects of the observer.

The artist Justin Guariglia, a former documentary photographer, has created a number of powerful works dealing with the visualization of climate change. His point of departure is the scientific gaze, the objectifying yet concerned perspective of NASA glaciologists trying to chart the effects of global warming where it is taking its most dramatic course, the Arctic ice cap. As an embedded artist with NASA's Oceans Melting Greenland mission, Guariglia takes photographs of some of the most remote places on the planet.[Image Quanaq] He transforms these basic visual data into highly complex, monumentally sized art works combining aerial photography with sophisticated artistic printing techniques. To the photographic view from afar Guariglia adds a complex, tactile surface, thus bringing the object of observation uncannily near. He reduces the shades of landscape to monochromatic patterns and deletes all background noise from the image, thus turning toward the essential through abstraction. Melting ice becomes a scattering of white particles on a black surface, brittle fragments of albedo lost in space. Working on a scale that is both huge and small, Guariglia's images translate the magnitude of the current disruption of climates, landscapes and life-worlds. [Image : Arctic Ocean I]

The sublime creates in the observer an acute sense of being awed and dwarfed by the magnitude of what is being observed. Guariglia taps into exactly this clash of scales implicit in an aesthetics of the sublime. The extremely sharp details of his images lets us lose all sense of the size of the represented object, the ice fragments, the scars in the surfaces of the melting glaciers, the smooth landscapes of frozen snow. While the high viewpoint and the large format of his prints enable him to give us a sense of the immensity of environmental disruption, the trompe l'oeil effect of his surfaces brings this immensity uncannily close. Climate change, he shows us, is not "out there" in some distant heterotopia, but within the reach of our fingertips. Closer than we might wish.

Aestheticizing landscapes of environmental destruction is not an uncommon strategy in the current art world. Often aerial photographers will emphasize the demonic beauty of the objects they are photographing, regardless of whether the subject is a highway in the desert, a poisoned landscape, an artificial island, or an oil spill. Guariglia, in contrast, goes a step further in a darker, and more political, direction. He does not stop with the overwhelming representation of nature transformed by humans. Rather, his work emphatically highlights the processes of destruction and corrosion. Guariglia leaves traditional beauty behind in favor of a grittier, more dramatic but also more analytic gesture: a new, post-natural aesthetic of landscape.

Unlike artists like Burtynsky or Maisel, Guariglia combines photography with an intricate and sophisticated printing process. Through his use of materials such as plastic, polystyrene and highly permanent polymer ink, Guariglia shows us that in the Anthropocene all human artifacts, from coffee cups to works of art, tend to have unforeseeably long lifespans. Take for example his images of the gashed, decomposing surface of a melting glacier printed on polystyrene panels. [Image: Jakobshavn I] You cannot tell whether you're looking at rugged polystyrene or a dying body of ice. But in one single glance, you can see the relation between melting glaciers and polystyrene, brilliantly expressed in his use of material. [Image: Jakobshavn I Surface Detail]

Printing on gold, pewter, linen, gesso, or aquarelle paper, and using a complicated printing process that can add up to 150 layers of polymer ink with a branded technique he calls Plasticene©, Guariglia explores the materiality of photography. Images of landscapes marked by intensive agriculture, climate change, surface mining or other forms of human impact are printed on materials unusual for the photographic process. They thereby acquire an eerie, almost haptic materiality. These are surfaces we want to touch, as if we need proof of what they display. With inks that will not fade or decompose in thousands of years, Guariglia points to the lifespan of art's materials. Like a polystyrene cup, his artworks will potentially last forever.

In this way, Guariglia creates not just aesthetic reflections but lasting bodies of evidence of the human ecological impact. He transforms the ephemeral medium of photography—a trace of light on a fragile surface—into a material testimony to the uncannily huge time scales of the Anthropocene. In an age when humankind has left its everlasting mark on the earth, Guariglia's extraordinary works bear witness to this mark, as both images and as material objects.