

Image as Landscape

Each medium has its own possibilities of articulation and expression. Paradoxically, these possibilities strike the eye even more strongly when the medium also has obvious limitations. It is thanks to the limitations that the possibilities gain in power. One could say that a medium is like a blind person: because of the blindness some other senses, e.g. that of touch or hearing, become hypersensitive.

Dry point etching is a clear and extreme case. The dry point allows only certain movements with the hand. One pushes the dry point or one pulls it through the copper plate. The lines resulting from these two movements are relatively straight in each case. It is impossible to “draw” with a dry point. One cannot make a flowing movement with a dry point like one can with a pencil. The copper plate resists such movements of the dry point. If one tries, the movement sticks, the point leaves the incision and cuts the pulled burr. Hence, flowing lines are almost impossible to realize in this medium. The medium dictates to the artist how to use it.

The dry point etchings of Britta Huttenlocher, however, challenge the medium. She alternates a pushing and pulling movement of the dry point with a movement which characterizes drawing. This “improper” use of the dry point results in hampered lines: the lines show swellings, they stop and form dots. The line, the definition of the line, is transformed. In general, a line is essentially a division. It separates the field into parts. And it is also a movement. It leads somewhere and it directs the eye. The thickened lines and dots in Huttenlocher’s etchings, however, become surface. Lines become outlines. They no longer form separations but evince tone and atmosphere.

So far, this description of Huttenlocher’s etchings sounds formalistic. Yet, her use of the dry point medium results in visual features that give rise to effects and affects that transgress the formal domain. First of all, the alternation of lines, thickened lines and dots visualizes the process in time that has resulted in these images. The viewer experiences a struggle between master and slave, between medium and artist’s hand. This struggle has an open ending. At some moments the hand complies with the movements dictated by the dry point technique. At other moments the dry point conforms to the directions of the artist. This struggle presents itself as a kind of dance, not as real competition. The struggle is intransitive. Its stake is not an ultimate winner. It is rather a process that tries to stabilize in a kind of rhythm of mastering and submission, of form and formlessness, of composition and decomposition, of self and loss of self.

But, second, Huttenlocher’s seemingly abstract images connote a realm that we also know from her other work – her collages, her drawings and watercolours – namely landscape. Although her works do not denote landscapes – for they are abstract – one could say that something resonates in them that I would like to call “landscapic.” The landscapic in her work does not evoke landscape in a general or idealized way. In spite of the overall abstraction of the images, the landscapic is evoked concretely as hills and mountains, as slopes and banks. The sea, the sky, the horizon, just to mention a few other landscape elements, are never connoted. It is because of this specific manifestation of the landscapic that Huttenlocher’s work acquires historical ramifications that are of crucial importance for a reading of her work. In order to address the historical situatedness of Huttenlocher’s work, I compare her works to the traditional landscape painting and landscape poem.

The representation of landscape in traditional landscape paintings and poems presents the world as a unified whole in relation to the observer. In the first place, the observer is the observer of the landscape inside the painting or poem (in the form of a focalising character or lyrical subject), but is at the same time the viewer of the painting or the reader of the poem. Looking at a landscape, the viewer implicitly places herself with reference to the perceived surroundings and, by virtue of becoming origin and destination of a larger vista’s line of sight, assumes a position from which to understand her role in the world.¹ This implies that to look at one’s surroundings as a “landscape”, (as a unified whole, that is) means to look at the world as the setting that lends meaning to one’s life.

¹ Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan*. Stanford 2000: Stanford University Press, p. 73

In landscape poetry, the encounter of the subject with itself in the act of contemplating its placement in the world results in a deepening of consciousness or heightened self-awareness. This dependence of the subject on the unified space of landscape does not neglect the importance of time. On the contrary: real or imagined travel are pervasive metaphors for humankind's passage through historical time. Ulrich Baer writes:

Without the possibility of placing oneself in reference to the surrounding landscape, the actual capacity of historical self-understanding and experience itself withers away. If the subject cannot properly place him- or herself in space, it seems impossible to think of oneself as having an experience that unfolds through time.²

It is above all romantic painting and poetry which have established this kind of connection between landscape and historical time. The romantic landscape is, however, far from general or diverse. The romantic experience is almost exclusively framed by craggy mountains and dark pine forests. These are the landscapes of Central European countries like Germany, Austria and Switzerland, which have formed the setting and catalyst for romantic self-understanding. But this kind of landscape has been tainted by the ideological use of the romantic tradition. Nazi ideology linked a specific group or nation to a given location and landscape. It is precisely because landscape painting and poetry so powerfully situates the reader or viewer that it was perverted with catastrophic results in the ideologies leading to the Second World War. These ideologies posited a link between geography, identity, and a belief in historical destiny.³

Because the landscape tradition had been co-opted by fascist ideologies, the outcome of the Second World War, the victory over nazism, has also had radical consequences for that tradition. Representations of craggy mountains and dark pine forests have become suspect as of that date. They are still contaminated by the myth of the landscape that projects "Heimat" on mountains and pine forests. As a result, these landscapes have more or less disappeared as theme or topos from artistic representations. In postmodern times these landscapes can only be dealt with ironically.

Huttenlocher's work, however, avoids irony. So the question that has to be answered is, how does her work relate to the landscape tradition, and more specifically, in what way does the imagery of mountains and forests figures in her work, albeit in connotative form.

As I mentioned before, her work is non-representational. She does not represent mountains and forests. That is even the case, I would like to argue, in the works which she made from 1989 to 1992 for which she used photocopies of mountain slopes and pine trees covered with snow.⁴ In these works she constructs images from cut parts of photocopies. This process results in montages that differ radically from the dada or surrealist photomontage. She does not stage a confrontation or combination of meaningful units in order to gain access to a so-far unknown referential world. Instead, she pursues an ordering not on the level of referentiality, but on the level of the image. The modulations and rhythms which are part of the photocopied landscapes are transferred to the image as such. These works enact the transferral of landscape qualities from the content of the image to the materiality of the image.

In this process of abstraction the illusion of a pictorial space that refers to a particular site gradually disappears. What is retained in the move from landscape painting to abstract painting is a strong sense of place made available to the viewer:

In abstract or "de-objectified" art this sense of place has become divorced from any reference to a real or imagined geographical site. The viewer is placed in relation to the

² Baer, *ibid.*, p. 218

³ Baer, *ibid.*, p. 219

⁴ See for a detailed reading of these works: Hans Janssen, "Visibly Painting," *Britta Huttenlocher*. Winterthur 1999: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, pp. 39-48

painting-as-landscape. [...] The landscape does not disappear in abstract art but is sublimated (both retained and overcome) into the space of the painting itself.⁵

Theodor Adorno has discussed Celan's poetry and its reliance on the landscape tradition in similar terms. He compares it to the de-objectified landscapes of abstract painting: "Celan translated into linguistic terms what happens to landscapes when they become more and more abstracted. More and more like inorganic matter."⁶ Precisely because of the fact that the central-European landscape can no longer function as a proper setting for experiences, Celan moved toward abstraction. It is within the hermetic structure of his poems that he created a new setting. This move is not a withdrawal from landscape painting and poetry. On the contrary. It is thanks to the move to abstraction that this tradition and its capacity of *placing* the viewer or reader is preserved.⁷

It is in this context that the drive for abstraction in Huttenlocher's work can be understood. It is driven by a wish to restore order by means of simple lines, dots and shapes. Now that the projection of order on mountain and forest landscapes has become an impossible and implausible project, the pursuit is carried out on a different ontological level: that of the image. From this perspective one could say that her artistic project is motivated by a historical and existential necessity. It is only in art that the conditions for self-experience and understanding can be recovered, no longer *in* the image, but *at the image as site*.

In his book *Remnants of Song* Ulrich Baer wonders if the abstract renditions of landscapes are contaminated by their startling resemblance to the actual killing fields of the last century, of the First as well as the Second World War. In that case the wreckage of these wars are not sublimated in the drive to abstraction, but just repeated in the act of representation itself. He introduces the distinction made by Walter Benjamin between landscape and terrain (*Gelände*) to resolve this dilemma. Benjamin was among the first to note the historical shift from the perception of the "landscape" as the symbolic setting for an individual's passage through time, to a "terrain" where coherent experience may no longer be available and onto which a coherent sense of self in time may no longer be projected.⁸

Already in the 1920's Benjamin diagnosed the destruction of landscape as a setting for historical experience and its transformation into terrain. In those days Europe was covered with vast and profoundly scarred areas left by warfare. The battlefields, especially the trenches, had functioned during the First World War as the exact opposite of landscape's role in the landscape tradition. "The landscape became a site that was carefully mapped and surveyed by instruments to allow large groups of men to vanish from sight rather than position themselves in relation to it."⁹ The surroundings were not regarded as a setting for the self, but as possible camouflage in which the self may disappear. When that became the case, the possibility of self-experience diminished. According to Benjamin, landscapes become terrain when they are depersonalised through such purely strategic perception.

However, the abstracted landscapes left in the wake of the World Wars of the twentieth century are the opposite of the images and poems which result from the drive for abstraction as an effort to overcome these ruined landscapes. Benjamin demonstrates this when he makes an analogy between Enlightenment thought that had failed to prevent the World Wars, and the abstracted landscapes left in their wake:

As far as it was possible to look beyond the edge of the trench, the surroundings had become the terrain of German Idealism itself, every shell crater a problem, every wire entanglement an antinomy, every barb a definition, each explosion an axiom, and the sky overhead during

⁵ Baer, *ibid.*, p. 234

⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by C. Lenhardt. London 1984: Routledge, p. 444

⁷ Baer, *ibid.*, p. 235

⁸ Baer, *Ibid.*, p. 224

⁹ Baer, *Ibid.*, p. 224

the day was the cosmic inside of the steel helmet, at night the moral law above you. Etching the landscape with flaming banners and running trenches, technology wanted to recreate the heroic features in the countenance of German Idealism.¹⁰ |

The abstracted landscape here is a landscape of destruction, radically hostile to human life and experience. The abstract images and poems which preserve the landscape tradition in the sense that they try to constitute a setting for self-experience, do not radiate destruction but rather construction. The similarity between the “abstracted” landscapes of the battlegrounds and the trenches on the one hand, and abstract images on the other, is in this respect only formalistic, hence, superficial. The modalities of an ordered landscape are not destroyed in the process of abstraction. Baer is concerned that they are preserved in their transferral to the non-representational image.

Baer’s concern compels me to reflect on the question of whether the preservation of the landscape tradition in the abstract images of Huttenlocher (or the hermetic poems of Celan), has changed the notion of order and ordering as they are performed in her works. For, if the landscape tradition could be appropriated by fascist ideologies, what about the abstract image-as-landscape? Could this kind of image be appropriated for similar goals? Her dry point etchings are relevant cases to address this issue. I will again build on the writings of Walter Benjamin, this time his article “Painting, or Sign and Marks,” (Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal) a text that coincidentally is very important for Huttenlocher.

Benjamin distinguishes different kinds of lines, among which are the graphic line and the line of the absolute sign. This last line is inherently magical; whatever it represents does not imbue it with magic. It is striking that in his discussion of the graphic line, Benjamin constantly evokes the realm of landscape:

The graphic line is defined by its contrast with area.[...] The graphic line marks out the area and so defines it by attaching itself to its background. Conversely, the graphic line can exist only against this background, so that a drawing that completely covered its background would cease to be a drawing.¹¹

Notions of “area”, “background”, but of course also “line,” are used ambiguously. They analyse the nature of the graphic line literally, that is formalistically, but at the same time they metaphorically built up the realm of landscape. The same expressions can be used to describe a landscape. This metaphorical dimension of Benjamin’s discussion of the graphic line becomes undeniable when he dwells on the background of a drawing:

The identity of the background of a drawing is quite different from that of the white surface on which it is inscribed. We might even deny it that identity by thinking of it as a surge of white waves (though these might not even be distinguishable to the naked eye).¹²

His comparison of the background with “a surge of white waves” introduces the dynamic movement in his description of the graphic line, a dynamism that also characterizes the composition of landscape.

Benjamin’s discussion of the line of the “absolute sign” radiates back on what he had to say about the graphic line, because every representational line also has an impact unrelated to its representational function. But in order to explain the absolute sign he needs another distinction, this

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, Edited by Ernst Jünger,” *New German Critique* 17 (spring 1979): 120-28

¹¹ Benjamin, “Painting, or Signs and Marks,” *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913 – 1926*, Cambridge MA 1996: Harvard University Press, p. 83

¹² Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 83

time the one between absolute sign and absolute mark. He claims that the sign seems to have more reference to persons, whereas the mark tends to exclude the personal. This intriguing but obscure remark becomes clear only later when he articulates a more basic difference:

... the sign is printed on something, whereas the mark emerges from it. This makes it clear that the realm of the mark is a medium. Whereas the absolute sign does not for the most part appear on living beings but can be impressed or appear on lifeless buildings, trees, and so on, the mark appears principally on living beings (Christ's stigmata, blushes, perhaps leprosy and birthmarks).¹³

The distinction between signs and marks as personal versus non personal can now be understood as follows: signs are intentionally made by a subject whereas marks just emerge or appear. Subjects are confronted with marks, but these are not intentionally made by them.

At first sight Benjamin's next step in his argument is rather puzzling. He declares that the medium of painting is that of the mark in the narrower sense, for it has neither background nor graphic line. He is very much aware of the strange implication of this logic because painting poses a "problem":

The problem of painting becomes clear only when we understand the nature of the mark in the narrower sense, while feeling astonished that a picture can have a composition even though this cannot be reduced to a graphic design.¹⁴

Composition in painting is not the result of the difference between graphic line and background but between the *reciprocal* demarcations of the coloured surfaces. Whereas in drawing the drawn line creates background, in painting there is not such a clear agency responsible for the emergence of the composition. Differences between colour reciprocally lead to composition. This different nature of painting's composition explains its status as mark. Composition *emerges*; it is the result of the qualities of the colours used, which come about differentially, that is reciprocally. These qualities are not intentionally made by an agent as is the case in the drawing of a graphic line.

The difference between drawing and painting can now be understood as the difference between sign and mark. Whereas composition in drawing is the result of a intentionally creative agency (the person who draws), in painting composition is only indirectly created by the painter. It is primarily brought about by the differential qualities of colours. The painter, of course, applies the colours, but she does not create their differential values; she only utilizes them. They have to be accepted as they emerge or appear.

Benjamin's understanding of the sign and the mark illuminates Huttenlocher's work, specifically her etchings. One could now say that in her works from 1989 until 1992 (the montages) and from 1992 until 1999 (the drawings on panel) she seems to explore the graphic line. The ordering of the compositions is at first sight the exclusive result of lines directed by the artist, cut or drawn. However, in both types of work, there are also elements which *emerge* and are in that sense painterly. Because the montages consist of photocopied images of photographed landscapes, the compositions of these landscapes were already there--they were "found." Although they were chosen to be used, they were not intentionally made and ordered by the artist. Ultimately, these photomontages demonstrate the struggle or tension between the ordering, directing hand of the draughtsman and elements which have to be accepted when they emerge.

The drawn panels which she made from 1992 until 1999 convey a similar tension. These works are most emphatically drawn. They consist exclusively of graphic lines. But their compositions contain striking repetitions. Many lines are doubled, sometimes even ten or eleven times as if they were drawn by a kind of comb. Lines follow in the track of other lines. These lines fundamentally

¹³ Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 84

¹⁴ Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 85

challenge Benjamin's understanding of the graphic line. They don't seem to be drawn by a directing subject. They exclude the personal, to use his words. They seem to have emerged in the wake of other lines. Their appearance seems to find their origin in other lines, not in human agency.

In 1998 Huttenlocher started to make watercolours. It is striking that Benjamin mentions watercolour as an exception within his schematic distinction of sign and mark, of drawing and painting. "The only instance in which colour and line coincide is in the watercolour, in which the pencil outlines are visible and the paint is put on transparently. In that case the background is retained, even though it is coloured."¹⁵ Benjamin highlights the fact that in watercolour one can "draw" with colour. But with respect to the opposition between signs that are intentionally made versus marks that just emerge, watercolours seem to be sign and mark at the same time. Although one can draw lines in colour, these lines are hard to direct. They flow and the artist has only limited control over them. A major part of the watercoloured line just emerges. Huttenlocher's choice of this technique is not arbitrary. It is very consistent within her artistic project which looks for the tension between sign and mark.

Her etchings embody this tension in yet another way. At the beginning of this essay I described them as the result of a struggle between master and slave. From time to time Huttenlocher draws with the dry point, although this instrument can only be pulled or pushed. The moment Huttenlocher does this, she is no longer able to direct the dry point. Dots and swellings emerge. She has used the possibilities and the limits of this medium in such a way that she is, again, as with the watercolours, the drawings on panel and the montages, in control of not being in control.

The groups of works within her oeuvre, different as they are, have in common not only that they actively look for the tension between sign and mark, but also that they evoke the landscapic, as distinguished from the landscape. As explained earlier, they do not represent landscapes, but propose the image-as-landscape. The burning question is whether these non-representational images-as-landscapes can be appropriated in the same way as has happened with the romantic landscape. The landscape tradition lent itself to appropriation because of its very specific notion of "landscape". It could function as contextual setting for self-understanding and *ground* the subject, thanks to the fact that the landscapes were represented as unified, ordered and organised. Benjamin's notion of "terrain" as negation of landscape is based on the fact that certain surroundings can no longer ground the subject because the destruction which has taken place there has destroyed its unity. So, organisation and ordering is a fundamental precondition for a surrounding to be called "landscape."

Huttenlocher's images-as-landscape consistently refuse a *total* and *complete* organisation of the image. There is always some element that challenges the "making" by the artist. These unruly elements "emerge" and they introduce Benjamin's notion of the absolute mark in works which seem to be governed by the absolute sign. Although Huttenlocher's works provide spatial settings before which the viewer can place and ground herself, this is only possible to a certain degree. Ultimately, the unruly elements break the illusion that the viewer has found her place in this image-as-landscape. At the last moment, the viewer is thrown back on herself: the link between one's self and a location or landscape is set free. This is necessary because it prevents the possibility which has been exploited by nazi ideology, that the subject legitimises itself by means of landscapes. Such a legitimisation is illegitimate because landscapes are the product of the ordering and organising impulses of human beings. Landscapes ask to be legitimised by subjects, instead of the other way round.

Huttenlocher's eventual refusal to unify her images-as-landscape completely, compels the viewer to ground *herself* in relation to the spatial dimension created by the artist. By that, the landscape—this time as image—has regained the role which belongs to it: that of setting for self-experience.

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¹⁵ Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 85