Sophia Greiff

Author and Curator for Photography

Mobile +49 (0) 170 – 7357267 • E-Mail mail@sophiagreiff.de • Web www.sophiagreiff.de

C/O Berlin – Talents 20. Left Behind

with photographer Friederike Brandenburg

Published by Deutscher Kunstverlag in August 2010

The Idyll Remains.
On the Aesthetic Unity of Nature and Civilization

The roof of a light-blue car, nestled among the spreading fronds of wild ferns and protected by lush green branches. A run-down wooden shack in a snowy landscape, its once brightly colored paint now dull and peeling. Two rusty freight car frames that blend seamlessly into their surroundings. Lonely and abandoned, useless and redundant, these urban castaways stand alone in vast landscapes, devoid of human life – in places where they do not really belong.

On her travels through Norway and New Zealand, photographer Friederike Brandenburg has sought out isolated traces of civilization in places otherwise presumed to represent a pristine, untouched state of nature. Searching beyond the well-traveled roads, in shady clearings or wide-open fields, she arrived upon things discarded by human society, whose singular aesthetic and absurd presences exerted a magical attraction. These ordinary, everyday objects – things that we would hardly even notice in an urban surrounding – only begin to emerge as distinct and unique when set in an uninhabited environment. Here, seen in a different context and a different light, they seem strange and out of place and at the same time captivating and strikingly picturesque. Friederike Brandenburg discovers poetic scenes in unusual places characterized by a homogenous palette and soft, muted light. Her photographs raise questions: about where these discarded objects came from; the reason for their existence; and the people they might once have meant something to.

Traces of Others

Behind an abandoned shack, whose chipped and peeling paint offers only the vaguest hint of its original red color, stands a Ford Transit from the 1970s. It, too, is marked by rust and the ravages of time. Surrounded by scattered automobile tires, the gutted chassis of a light-blue compact car, and pieces of scrap metal poking out from the snow-laden bushes, it lies in a vast landscape that it

probably will never leave. The house, too, looks vacant; most likely deserted by its former residents. What would we find if we ventured inside, as photographer Eugene Richards did in his work “The Blue Room”? Richards came across objects in old, abandoned buildings in rural America, places where a human presence is still clearly palpable. A woman’s red shoe among debris and broken glass; yellowed family photos and documents; a deck of cards and battered dolls, a wedding dress suspended from a bedroom door like a hovering ghost. Deserted, empty rooms filled with the personal relics and dispossessed mementos that people have left behind. In Richards’ mysterious and melancholy pictures, life and deterioration stand silently side by side. Questions about the fates of the former inhabitants of these places and where they have gone hang in the air, unanswered. Like Richards, Friederike Brandenburg does not show people in her photographs but lets their traces tell the tale.

In Brandenburg’s work, however, the objects tell a different story, one that does not revolve around their owners but around the objects’ function. Her objects are cars that can no longer be driven, scrap metal that has been dumped, everyday objects that have been intentionally discarded or cast aside. By focusing on these questions of function, she distances the objects from their absent owners. We may wonder at how these people treat nature and their implements, but we never find out anything about their lives. Friederike Brandenburg concentrates on the nameless and discarded legacies, allowing them to come into their own as autonomous beings. It is not human fates that interest her, but the objects in relation to their surroundings.

This connection between places and the human traces left in them has been a frequent theme in the history of photography. Landscape is commonly invested with meaning; it stands for something bygone, the shadow of a past time. It acts as a space for experience and remembrance. It is shaped by official laws and crisscrossed by boundaries, both visible and invisible. Landscape is a metaphor for history and a register of what has existed before. The traces left behind tell of wars and environmental catastrophes, of home and the sense of rootedness, of oppression as well as freedom. The photograph – itself a trace of the real and the bygone – becomes the medium for recording the signs and remains of lives that have been and gone.

The absence of a concrete connection between artifact and landscape lends Friederike Brandenburg’s photographs an aura of the mysterious and the inexplicable. There is almost a sense of absurdity in a bus entirely surrounded by tree branches standing on a lonely stretch of coastline; a red fisherman’s house clinging to a rough, rocky sea cliff; a pickup truck loaded with brush and branches and abandoned in the middle of a wild, verdant forest clearing. The clues cannot be clearly deciphered. The places where these objects were abandoned are not rural

housing developments; not junkyards or car dumps – these places were not intended for the disposal of obsolete things. Questions about where the objects came from and how they ended up in these unusual places slowly dissipate, unanswered – all one can do is guess. Perhaps it was convenience, or carelessness, a stop along the road, an accident. The clues are missing, so the reasons for these human traces in the landscape must remain shrouded in the mists of the past.

The Poetry of the Un-Picturesque

In the year 1975, the exhibition "New Topographics. Photographs of a Man- Altered Landscape"[1] was shown in the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The show presented a new way of looking at the American landscape in the work of photographers like Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, and Stephen Shore, a perspective that would shape the style of photography for years to come. There was a turn away from the romantic and idealized images of the Wild West and a shift toward the documentation of suburban subdivisions and its architectural forms, expanding ever outward into the landscape. The focus of these photographers' work was on everyday objects not normally seen as visually interesting: streets, parking lots, motels, and electrical lines were treated as valid visual elements. The photographers positioned themselves as distanced observers of the changing landscape, and their sober gaze opened up diverse modes of interpretation. The gaze they brought to these objects was an aesthetic one. Their intention was not to criticize or to judge, however they provoked the viewer to critically examine the human relationship to the natural environment: "Their apparent acceptance, for aesthetic purposes, of questionable uses of the land was a controversial position to take, but the fact is, whatever their political leanings, they were not tree-sitters or back-to-the-landers, but artists making pictures in places that interested them."[2]

A very similar case can be seen in the photography of Friederike Brandenburg. In the series "Left Behind," she counters the forsaken objects with her own meticulous attention. Her gaze imbues them with meaning and allows them to be perceived once again. She makes things visible that others do not want to see, things they have removed from their everyday surroundings. Like the New Topographics, Friederike Brandenburg also seems to avoid making moral judgments or criticism of what she finds. She creates a compositional balance between nature and civilization. Backhoes and hills, trucks and mountains seem to face each other in silent understanding: 'It is what it is; this place belongs to both of us.' Perhaps it does not correspond to our ideal image of landscape, but humanity has indeed left its traces, sometimes even imposing ugliness on once-impressive natural settings. Friederike Brandenburg documents her impressions with a sense of reserve and restraint, concentrating on the visual relationships between the objects and their surroundings. The ambience of the light, the frequent use of uniform tonality, and compositions

that give equal space to the natural features of the landscape and human traces – these qualities highlight aesthetic harmony and reject the portrayal of discarded objects as disruptive intruders. Through Brandenburg's focus on the isolated object in a vast landscape, her photographs exude a tone of quiet wonder rather than loud accusation.

In this respect, Friederike Brandenburg's visual compositions differ from current trends in landscape photography that engage in overt reflection on the impacts of humans and industry on the natural environment – often via dramatic and very striking images that portray nature as beautiful yet vulnerable. One example is Olaf Otto Becker, who documents changes in Greenland's glacial landscapes, reminding us that human beings leave their mark even on the earth's most unpopulated regions. His photographs show meltwater rivers and pools amid massive and awe-inspiring glaciers; layers of soot and dirt covering the once-pristine surface of the ice; powerful natural spectacles threatened by climate change and global warming. Despite the breathtaking beauty of these photographs, the disaster lurking beneath the magnificent surface is always perceptible.

The works of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky present an even clearer and more drastic picture. He, too, focuses on the changes human intervention has wrought on the natural environment. But most of these changes are consciously imposed – in the form of quarries and refineries, train tracks and scrap yards. His dense, often monochrome images are shockingly beautiful and at the same time deeply alarming. Burtynsky describes his photographs as "metaphors for the dilemma of our modern existence as I search for a visual dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear [...] our dependence on nature to provide materials for our consumption, and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction."[3] In Burtynsy's work, this contradiction is visualized in the paradoxical relationship between beauty and destruction. His photographs of glowing red rivers of chemicals that flow like streams of lava through a black landscape compellingly capture this symbiosis. Here, it is no longer nature that stands for the sublime, conveying a sense of awe and danger. Rather, Edward Burtynsky presents us with the industrial sublime that fills us simultaneously with wonder and fear.

This current trend in landscape photography has become louder, more direct, and more emotional than the approach pioneered by the New Topographics. As Jean-Christophe Ammann rightly noted, photographers like Burtynsky make aesthetics "turn our stomachs."[4] They are not afraid of making moral judgments of what they see or of urging us to correct our understanding of landscape and nature. According to Hansjörg Küster, "nature is [never] the same thing as

landscape. Nature exists and passes away whether we are aware of it or not. Landscape always involves reflection. When we see landscape, we interpret it."[5] We compare it with our ideals and models, with metaphors and stories, with our ideas of the "typical" landscape. When what we see corresponds to our expectations, we see the landscape as beautiful.[6] Although nature is subject to constant change, and although we shape it through our influence, the idealized image of an untouched arcadia still persists in our minds: "In guilt or despair we try to block out these manifestations of our presence, and lift up our eyes unto the hills beyond – hoping that they, at least, will still look something like the work of Ansel Adams."[7]

Like Olaf Otto Becker and Edward Burtynsky, Friederike Brandenburg invites the viewer to reflect on our relationship to our natural environment, and highlights the traces of human presence in majestic nature. The traces she uncovers, however, are not portents of doom that signal the impending demise of our endangered environment. She does not show nature as wounded victim, but as intact and vital. Her landscapes correspond to the "typical" images we have of Norway and New Zealand: the barren mountains and uninhabited areas of the Lofoten Islands, the long sandy stretches of Muriwai Beach, the verdant coastal strip of the East Cape. And, in a photograph from the tiny Norwegian fishing village, Å, codfish hangs from huge wooden frames, drying in the salty winds just as they did long ago. Friederike Brandenburg then violates this peaceful, idyllic picture by illustrating human incursions into the landscape. Yet these do not seem to affect nature very much. The discarded remnants of human life are absorbed into the environment and merge seamlessly with the idyllic landscape. They do not injure or endanger their surroundings. Rather, their own transience emphasizes the regenerative power and persistence of nature. The heavy steel beam stranded on a rocky coast becomes the stage for the natural spectacle unfolding behind it: a powerful wave crashing theatrically against the rocky shore.

One could ask whether it is legitimate to portray these discarded objects in such harmonious and apparently uncritical terms; whether the photographer is not actually prettifying or poeticizing human interventions into nature. But Friederike Brandenburg's photographs go beyond pure aestheticization. She does not silence or conceal, but observes and shows. The compositional unity between civilization and landscape does not stand for apathy towards human interventions, but emphasizes nature's adaptability. Friederike Brandenburg's view of the human trace is not neutral, but optimistic.

Brandenburg takes a similar approach in other work. In her diploma project "Waidwerk" (The Hunter's Craft), she explores the theme of hunting, showing that it is much more than just the killing of defenseless animals. She avoids this common cliché by focusing on the impressive

mountain landscape, in which the hunters themselves seems to disappear. Showing how they merge with their surroundings, how they wait and watch, she reveals the experience of nature as an integral component of the hunt. This experience is also tangible in her series “Landschaften” (Landscapes). Seemingly endless mountains, steep rocky crags, vast expanses of wild terrain – nature in all its strength and vitality. But even there we see isolated traces of human presence: infinitesimally small houses in the distance, stone walls, and tiny human figures on a high flat cliff overlooking a fjord.
In her photographs, Friederike Brandenburg conveys the atmosphere of the place, the serene sense of calm pervading these vast landscapes. At the same time, she does not deny that even nature, with all its apparent permanence, is subject to change. She positions her work between the cool distance of the New Topographics and the dramatic emotionalism of critical landscape photography; her gaze shapes landscapes, which in turn incorporate the changes imposed by human hands. The idyll remains – despite the human intervention.

Sculptures in the Mobile Age
In the middle of a wide stretch of sandy beach lies an almost completely rusted-out metal ruin. It is nearly unrecognizable as an old car, stranded in no-man’s land. Separated from its original function, it can only be seen as an abstract form, an aesthetic object that merges like a piece of Land Art into its natural surroundings. It becomes part of the landscape, forms a connection to it – and still remains identifiable as an independent element, shaping our reception of the landscape. This sculptural quality, which provokes reflection in the viewer, is inherent in almost all of the pieces in Friederike Brandenburg’s series “Left Behind.” The long black synthetic pipes in a wide snowy clearing, the rusted freight car frames in a barren field, the two old vans facing each other – all come across like sculptures placed in the landscape for the sole purpose of pushing us to confront and engage it.

This aesthetic view of discarded objects calls to mind the “Unintended Sculptures” of Henrik Saxgren. His primary interest is in the artistic potential of human constructions and interventions into the landscape. Like Brandenburg, he seeks out the accidental beauty and appeal in these objects, which he presents as contemporary ready-mades: “Henrik Saxgren’s eye teaches us that we can find art anywhere. We need only keep our eyes wide open and learn to see. Where others see junk and detritus, Saxgren finds things of beauty.”[8] With a trace of irony, he documents absurd human constructions and the unintended connections that emerge between artifacts and landscapes. In Saxgren’s work as well, it is not altogether clear what functions the objects once served and why they ended up there: makeshift walls or fences that seem to partition off stretches of countryside arbitrarily; a glowing tower amid a field of sunflowers; an object wrapped in green

plastic in a desolate area. Along with the unique aesthetic qualities of these objects and structures, Saxgren also highlights their strangeness within their surroundings. The landscape is not the main character, but only has meaning in connection with these found sculptures.

The role of landscape is different in Friederike Brandenburg's work. In her photographs, the landscape – or nature – plays an essential role. It absorbs the discarded objects, envelops them in rust and moss, covers them with snow and luxuriant, protective branches. It transforms the cast-off remnants of human society; and precisely by taking possession of them, it lends them their unique aesthetic appeal. The artifacts become nature sculptures that are changed by processes in their environments and undergo further changes over the course of time. Friederike Brandenburg's photographs thus visualize natural change: the dynamics of growth, decay, and renewal. Objects of civilization weather and are absorbed into the flourishing nature. This is particularly evident in the photo of a gutted tour bus that almost disappears into the shadows of the forest. The bus, whose paint has flaked off over the years, seems to have adapted to the surrounding tones of the trees and the mossy forest floor. Like a modern memento mori, it is a reminder of the transience of life and earthly things. Nothing is forever: even the apparatuses created by human hands will someday find their final resting place.

This again brings Edward Burtynsky to mind. In his series "Shipbreaking," he documents the demolition of oil tankers and marine ships for scrap recycling in India and Bangladesh. In these and other third world countries, huge, rusted machines filled with toxic fumes and fluids are disassembled partly by hand since the 1970s – barefoot and without protective clothing.[9] Although the workers are seen in some of the photographs, Burtynsky's focus is not on their fate but on the monumentality of the wrecks that are there to be recycled. They stand, like the voluminous metal sculptures of Richard Serra, in an unvarying beach landscape.[10] These rusted behemoths, clustered into small groups, have reached the end of their journey through the industrial process. These relics of technology are also evidence of transience and decay. But Burtynsky abstracts them into forms and colors, focusing on their aesthetic interactions within space. He shows the industrial sublime, the shocking beauty that these shipwrecks exude: "The monolithic forms of the ships are like stage props in a surrealist play; they provide a backdrop to the drama of their own demise."[11] Progress and obliteration, grace and decay lie remarkably close together.

In Friederike Brandenburg's series "Left Behind" we also encounter a shipwreck, although this one is more of a boat than a ship: it is smaller, more inconspicuous than the monumental metal sculptures documented by Burtynsky. It was not taken apart by human hands, but destroyed by

the forces of nature and left stranded on a rocky beach. Here, as well, destruction is elevated to its own aesthetic. Resembling a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, the broken wooden boat lies on its side, half submerged in the water, half on the rocks, its bow pointing towards the shore. The boat wreck blends into its snowy, mountainous surroundings and becomes a metaphor for a mobile age that has reached its limits. It is an allegory for an age when almost anyone can go anywhere, when progress is constantly opening up new possibilities, creating the illusion that anything is possible. This is an age that never lets us forget that mobility and development can also create problems and casualties; that they can leave remnants of civilization in places where such traces were never intended nor desired.

What is missing in Friederike Brandenburg's work, in comparison to Caspar David Friedrich's painting of a ship in a sea of ice, is the drama. For Brandenburg, little irritations in the landscape are enough to give the viewer subtle hints, prompting reflection on the relationship between humanity and nature. And it is precisely this act of reflection that the series "Left Behind" seeks to provoke. After all, according to art critic Hanno Rauterberg, "good art invites the viewer to interpret, but without being completely interpretable."[12] It stimulates our curiosity and makes us think; it sharpens our perception and raises questions. Friederike Brandenburg's work does not contain any answers, but leaves the critical analysis to the viewer. Through subtle suggestions of the human interventions and intrusions into the "typical" landscapes of our imagination, she gives back to plain sight what had been discreetly removed from our field of vision and left here to rot, in the idyll.

[1] See Britt Salvesen, New Topographics (Tucson/Rochester/Göttingen: Steidl, 2009).

[2] Ibid i, 36.

[3] Nadine Barth, "Edward Burtynsky," in Verschwindende Landschaften, edited by Nadine Barth, (Cologne: Dumont, 2009).

[4] Jean- Christophe Ammann, Inge Rambow: Wüstungen. Fotografien 1991–1993 (Frankfurt am Main: Stadt Frankfurt Dez. Kultur u. Freizeit, 1998), 3.

[5] Hansjörg Küster, "Was ist Landschaft?" in Schöne Aussichten. Kleine Geschichte der Landschaft, idem. (Munich: Beck, 2009), 15.

[6] Ibid v, 34.

[7] Reyner Banham, "The Man-Mauled Desert," in Desert Cantos, edited by Richard Misrach (New Mexico: University of Mexico Press, 1990), 1.

[8] Bill Kouwenhoven, "The Accidental Masterpieces of Henrik Saxgren," in Henrik Saxgren: Unintended Sculptures, by Bill Kouwenhoven, Timothy Persons, and Henrik Saxgren (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 11.

[9] See Lori Pauli, "Seeing the big picture," in Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky, by Edward Burtynsky et al. (Ottawa/New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009), 32f.

Mobile +49 (0) 170 – 7357267 • E-Mail mail@sophiagreiff.de • Web www.sophiagreiff.de

---

[10] See Kenneth Baker, “Form versus portent: Edward Burtynsky’s endangered landscapes” in Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky, by Edward Burtynsky et al. (Ottawa/New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009), 41.

[11] Lori Pauli, “Seeing the big picture Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky, by Edward Burtynsky et al. (Ottawa/New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009), 32.

[12] Hanno Rauterberg, Und das ist Kunst?! Eine Qualitätsprüfung, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2007), 190.