

## THE PHOTOGRAPH THAT TOOK THE PLACE OF A MOUNTAIN

### *Photographic mountaineering with Witho Worms*

*There they are, ground from their own slag,  
Photographs replacing coal mountains.*

A line, paraphrased from the philosophically inclined poetry of Wallace Stevens, in which I try to relate an important aspect of photographer Witho Worms' carbon prints of slag heaps to Stevens' words, which play on the idea of verbal reference replacing its referent:

*There it was, word for word,  
The poem that took the place of a mountain.<sup>1</sup>*

The titanic photo project on which Worms worked for half a dozen years culminated in 2012 in a series of unique carbon prints and an artist's book, made with Hans Gremmen, titled *Cette Montagne, C'est Moi* (This Mountain, It's Me). Slag heaps are man-made mountains that can be found in the former coal mining regions of central and northwestern Europe. Worms photographed over one hundred of them, in Poland, Germany, Belgium, France, and Wales. His final series totals 68 photographs, an even number for each country, so that the framed images can be presented in complete grids. In a statement on his website, Worms names these slag heaps "black pyramids" and considers them a "symbol for a vanishing era that began with the industrial revolution and has now evolved into an age dominated by binary code." On a different occasion he referred to them as "burial mounds of an effectively bankrupt capitalist system."<sup>2</sup> We might consider them manifestations of historian David E. Nye's idea of "anti-landscape": the polluted wastelands resulting from humans' turning the earth inside out in their relentless craving of raw materials and fuel.

Worms photographed the mountains in panorama format (11x20" Ilford film), using an Austrian-made Lotus View camera, which he had refurbished according to his specifications. Around each mountain that he

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain", in: *Collected Poems*, Alfred. A Knopf, 1971 (1954), p. 512. Stevens referred to his poetic oeuvre as "the planet on the table".

<sup>2</sup> Hinde Haest, "Witho Worms: Cette Montagne, C'est Moi", in: *Foam Magazine* #49, 2017-2018, p. 152.

photographed, Worms collected and labeled chunks of coal, which he then used as the raw material for the pigments to be employed in his homegrown carbon printing process. One fascinating consequence of this process is that the slag heaps delivered the raw material for their *own* representation—via Witho, his camera, and his elaborate darkroom procedures that require the perseverance of a mountaineer.<sup>3</sup>

Next to nothing in the process was done according to standardized methods or using industrially-produced materials, particularly not the printing. Worms drew inspiration and knowledge from an old carbon printing process, the basics of which were made practicable in 1855 by Alphonse Louis Poitevin. Major improvements followed in 1864, when Joseph Wilson Swan developed the printing of halftones. Carbon printing is an exacting process, seen by some historians as the king of printing methods, and described by Jan van Dijk, an expert in historical photographic techniques, as “photographic paper that requires workmanship in its processing”.<sup>4</sup>

Sparing you the further details of this labor-intensive process, what particularly interests me here is the intricate interplay of the image and its materiality, in short: a fusion (or overlapping) of icon and index (bypassing Charles S. Peirce’s sign theory and its influence on photographic theory). Worms’ mountain photographs appear to be circular and watertight. This photograph of a mountain was *made* with the materials that make (or made) up the very same mountain that I see *as* and *in* and *through* that photograph? What the image partly constitutes has been removed from the mountain, sometimes before and more often after its depiction. These photographs are a photo theoretician’s wet dream, just like Hiroshi Sugimoto’s work (his movie theater series in particular), Thomas Demand’s photographic scale-model reality, or René Magritte’s mind-boggling illusions, their images frequently referred to by academics to support their lengthy (and often wearisome) reflections on (ocular) reality and (visual) representation.

On a somewhat different note, there is what we might call an “underexposed tradition” in photography and art in which image and referent are brought into intense dialogue. In the nineteenth century, for example, it was common practice to keep a wisp of a (deceased) loved one’s

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<sup>3</sup> Instead, the book was offset printed on black paper, with cyan, yellow, magenta, and two trays with white ink, using the negative images. The blackness of the paper represents the dark parts of the mountains, whereas in the series of monochrome carbon prints, the tonal scales are varied because each mountain yielded different hues of carbon. Worms sees the book as a conceptual translation of the project, and as a work of art in its own right.

<sup>4</sup> Jan van Dijk, *Handboek herkennen fotografische en fotomechanische procedés*, Primavera Pers, 2011, p. 152.

hair in a tiny locket, placed opposite or next to his or her portrait.<sup>5</sup> In 1979, artist Richard Long published his *River Avon Book* about large rivers, the mud from whose banks he had literally smeared over the pages. And on the African continent, traditions have emerged in which the ashes of the dead are scattered over their photographic representations, as anthropologist Heike Behrend recounts.<sup>6</sup>

Are Worms' photographs photography *itself*; are these mountains *themselves* as they have been remodeled in their own image; is Worms the mountain? For all their elegant and conceptual simplicity, these photographs seem to be encircled by a halo of radical *in-betweenness*, allowing for a threshold experience. Is there even an inside or outside to these tautological photographs? "The idea of a thing is the thing itself,"<sup>7</sup> writes Giorgio Agamben in *The Coming Community*, a philosophical meditation on the Latin term *quodlibet* ("being such that it always matters"). Agamben also writes: "The *outside* is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access—in a word, it is its face, its *eidōs*."<sup>8</sup>

Worms' photographic mining of a "bankrupt" landscape also has consequences for thinking about (the concept of) landscape. Is it nature anthropomorphized, or culture naturalized? Can we even conceive of landscape before or beyond the image? Can we dwell in or inside a landscape, or can landscape only be *object* or *project*, thrown in front of us, confronted as image-thing, as *Gegenstand*?<sup>9</sup>

According to Victor Stoichita, "still-life, like landscape, is the product of conflict."<sup>10</sup> Tension between image and referent arises between "this side of the painting" and what is beyond (literally, behind) the painted landscape, in the imagined or depicted distance.

Landscape, in its secular conception, is generally thought to have begun with the late-medieval poet Petrarch, who, after he ascended to the top of Mont Ventoux in 1336, enjoyed the panoramic view for its own sake,

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of such vernacular practices, see: Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, Van Gogh Museum & Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Heike Behrend, "Photo Magic: Photographs in Practices of Healing and Harming in East Africa", in: *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33 (2003), pp. 129-145.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> The German word for "object", literally meaning "the thing or that which stands in front (of you)" or "standing against". I'm also reminded of *Widerstand* ("resistance").

<sup>10</sup> Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 34.

which was a revolutionary act at a time when everything natural was explained in biblical terms.<sup>11</sup> A few centuries later, in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, landscape was discharged from its allegorical and decorative functions and, in being foregrounded, became a genre of its own. These changes have thoroughly informed our concepts and experience of landscape, including its remediations in photography and cinema.

Another great mountaineer of landscape imaging, the painter Paul Cézanne, virtually *authored* Mont Sainte-Victoire, which has since become *his* mountain. It is hard to think of it without any Cezannesque image coming to your mind's eye. Rather than having been painted *by* Cézanne, Mt. Sainte-Victoire rather painted itself *through* Cézanne.

By virtue of Worms' ingenious *photo-graphics*, a slag heap *copyrighted* by Worms climbs itself with a little help from the photographer, after which it proclaims, "Look! I am my own mountain!"

(2013/2018)

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<sup>11</sup> See: Ton Lemaire, *Filosofie van het landschap*, Ambo, 2007 (1970), p. 17.