

“ERDLLEBENBILDKUNST” IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

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There have been no landscapes in art history that weren't constructed and simulated. While Petrarch's much admired account of his ascent of Mont Ventoux, dated 26th of April 1336—to directly pick out the most famous representation of landscape at the beginning of our art history—was, largely as a result of Jacob Burckhardt's vigorous appreciation, for a long time unchallenged as being a document that testified to the birth of an epoch in the history of aesthetic experience, signalling a new subjective consciousness of nature and the world, “a world emotion, a world addiction”,¹ contemporary research sees it only as a fictitious document in an idealised autobiography. Petrarch's letter is not a spontaneous expression of an overwhelming experience of landscape, rather the landscape merely serves as a foil for what is a calculated discourse in a moral philosophy structured by tropes and topoi. Petrarch did not actually have a “direct encounter” with the “spectacle of nature”, as Burckhardt maintained.² On the contrary: this landscape, which was to be celebrated as a portrait, was constructed by the poet using, among other things, numerical symbolism, to become an extremely elaborate “allegory of metaphors”.³ It has this in common with the landscape art of all epochs: even the early German images, created around 200 years after Petrarch, and seen as the first ‘autonomous’ landscapes, came to be recognised as constructions,⁴ after repeated attempts were made to analyse them according to botanic taxonomy in line with Burckhardt's dictum that the images of the Renaissance artists had been wrested directly from nature. And even the supposedly so neutral photography is no longer a ‘pencil of nature’, faithfully reproducing nature, or, to take it even further: enabling nature to reproduce itself, but is seen as an image-making process that frustrates any ideal of objective representation and creates its own reality.

Rainer Eisch's work “mr_broum” is to be understood in this tradition. Here is no faithful representation of a landscape according to nature, but a code. Central to the installation is a modified 16 mm film projector showing a loo-

ped film of a virtual flight over a technically generated surface, which can be morphologically interpreted as a landscape. This apparent panorama, however, is free from accidentals such as flora, fauna or signs of human culture; looking closer all that can be discerned in the projected image are textures made up of thousands of polygons. Actually there are two different polygon textures superimposed on each other. Since both layers are to some extent transparent, we tend to see through an ‘upper’ layer to a layer which is ‘further back’, but because of the different contours of the layers and the resultant differing and changing distances to the recording camera, we get the impression that they are both moving at different speeds, an effect which still further increases the ‘lifelike’ feeling of the film. A dislocation, however, is caused by the absence of typical landscape features and the polygon structure, alongside an overall redness of the image and the floating of the textures in front of a black ground. Because of the transparency of both layers there is no ground, as it were no groundedness, in the constructed image; in front and behind, above and below the surfaces is no reference point that enables a reading of the image as a panorama of a real landscape.

Looked at from a technical point of view, in terms of a production aesthetic “mr_broum” is also a many-layered construct. In the beginning was the computer. In order to preclude a mimetic simulation of reality an older version of a 3-D graphic programme was deliberately chosen to digitally generate the single frames. Once the single frames—which were initially generated in cinemascope format and afterwards compressed by a factor of two into 16 mm film format—had been calculated and rendered as a loop, they were filmed frame for frame using an animation camera and a specially constructed interface and guidance programme. In the projection the image is given back its original cinemascope format in that it is re-stretched by a factor of two through the anamorphic lens of a 35 mm projector, which is mounted in front of the lens of the 16 mm projector. An integral part of the installation is an endless-loop film spool mounted onto the projector that serves to sculpturally describe the film loop, allowing the viewer to appreciate the cyclic repeating of the film on a physical and material level.

If we search for artefacts in the history of visual art that could be seen as structurally analogous to Rainer Eisch's projected images, our attention is drawn to the doctor, natural philosopher, painter and art theorist Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869). Carus's particular focus was landscape painting. Although since the Renaissance landscape painting had become increasingly important as an autonomous artistic discipline, the earth itself and its geological qualities had never really been its subject. The friend of Caspar David Friedrich tried to newly define what modern landscape painting could be. In accordance with the concepts of romantic natural philosophy, notions like process and temporality were central for him.⁵ Closely connected to this were ideas about states of permanent metamorphosis in nature, especially as developed by Goethe in his writings on natural philosophy.⁶ For Carus geological formations are no longer the traditional places for mythical events or transcendent experiences, rather the earth itself becomes an object of scientific study with the aim of making visible its integral life principle. Landscape is no longer seen as the stage for historical events, but as the manifestation of its own history, not as static and unchanging, but constantly in motion. In his "Briefen über Landschaftsmalerei" (Letters on Landscape Painting) Carus coined the notion of the "Erdlebenbild" (Living Earth Image) and "Erdlebenbildkunst" (Living Earth Art) to characterise this new way of looking at landscape. In opposition to the static-seeming concepts of "landscape" and "landscape image" he introduces terms which express a fundamental dynamic view of nature, the recognition of the creation of the earth as a historical process.

As a *conditio sine qua non* for a renewal of landscape painting Carus demanded a study of the leading contemporary science of geology, in other words, a scientific interest in the dynamism of the internal processes of the earth, its corporeality and aliveness.⁷ In the same way that the much discussed physiognomy of Lavater attempted to systematise inner conditions through the typology of outward appearance, a "physiognomy of mountains", drawn from geology, or rather from geognosy, as the new science of the history of the earth was called, should allow conclusions to be drawn about the inner qualities of the earth from

its external appearance, thus providing the scaffolding for the new "Erdlebenbildkunst". As a programmatic expression of this primary concept we can look at the drawing of a "geognostic landscape", the so-called "Katzenköpfe bei Zittau" (cats' heads near Zittau), which is distinguished by a particular basalt formation that Carus attempted to exactly reproduce (Ill. 1). Carus was particularly excited by basalt and basalt mountains because of their highly individual outward appearance and distinctive physiognomy. He noted in 1820 in his "Andeutungen zu einer Physiognomik der Gebirge" (Remarks on the Physiognomy of Mountains) that, "Ultimately however it seems that of all the mountain formations that I am familiar with there can be no other that so distinguishes itself through its physiognomy as the basalt formation. High, rugged and climbing to a point, the single mountain peaks proclaim it from afar; those that come closer however, are struck by the deep colour of the stone, the raw, sharp-edged surfaces of the walls, and by the basalt pillar formations, particularly by the towering, mostly somewhat leaning masses of pillars, which are lined up in rows like an organ." And talking about the "Katzenköpfe" in his memoirs, Carus said, "It is an extremely interesting place in our highlands, the enormous basalt elevations have torn through the sandstone base in this area in many places and pushed themselves up here as the most beautiful pillar formations and there as formless stone."

As a volcanic stone, basalt was, for Carus, evidence of the at the time much discussed "vulcanic" or "plutonic" thesis of the formation of the earth through volcanic activity, and was a visual testimony to this creative power.⁸ The drawing of the "Katzenköpfe"—and in the same way his famous later

depictions of the dramatic basalt pillars around Fingal's Cave on the island of Staffa in the Scottish Hebrides—calls up associations of both built and architectural forms as well as of organic structures. Carus makes it clear to us that here are structures that have grown following the natural laws of becoming and expiring, thus exposing an essential aspect of the life of the earth. As



Ill. 1 Carl Gustav Carus, Geognostic Landscape. Katzenköpfe near Zittau, 1820

an artist he does not depict geological formations as ever-present and eternal, but, through his style of representation, he puts emphasis on the landscape as the perpetually changing result of a creative natural potency. In the "Katzenköpfe" we are able to see how the various geological strata connect to each other, merging out of and into each other. And by fracturing and splitting the rugged ancient stone of basalt in his drawing, by allowing it to partly dissolve and flow into the earth, Carus shows us that also and even especially in such an apparently immutable and eternal stone the traces of natural processes become visible on the earth itself. It is striking that it is exactly the polygonal structure which is so typical for basalt which we re-encounter in "mr_broum", as so to speak its physiognomy and essential characteristic. With his layered and folded geometric textures, Rainer Eisch raises the same associations of geotectonic hardness and durability, and in bringing these textures into irregular movement he demonstrates like Carus organic changeability and natural process. His electronically generated art opens in the same way a view into the anatomy of the earth or, in the words of the romanticist: into "a part of the enormous skeleton of this globe".

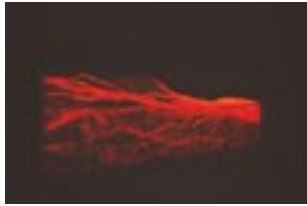
Among the conceptual descendants of this "Erdleben-bildkunst" is the work of Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). Looking particularly at his painted tableaux of Montagne Sainte-Victoire from the beginning of the 20th century, what comes to light is both an abstraction of reality and its simultaneous new creation through the medium of painting (Ill. 2). Despite his rejection of a direct similarity between image and nature, of representation or illusion,



Ill. 2 Paul Cézanne, La Montagne Sainte-Victoire, 1904-1906

Cézanne manifestly produces an image of reality. A single physical paint daub may not often indicate something concrete: there is no factual circumstance or characteristic that it could be said to directly refer to. From its context however we are able to read aspects of reality, whether it be a hillside, a sun-drenched plain or the reflection of clouds. Cézanne's landscape refuses any

symbolic, allegorical or metaphorical allusions. It is anti-mimetic, but still not abstract, an absolute art in the literal sense: free from the reproduction of reality but still a representation of the world.⁹ Cézanne transforms external reality into the logic of a structure, which has been often described as a crystallisation or as a woven carpet of paint daubs. His famous expression of cylinder, cone and sphere, which can be equally seen as the building blocks of nature and of the painting, is, as well as being a play on the traditional topos of the 'Book of Nature' that is written in these 'letters',¹⁰ an expression of the aesthetic belief that the image needs to be a realisation of a harmony, which in its structure is analogous to nature. Cézanne interpreted nature as a "parallelogram of forces"¹¹—a concept which came to an ingeniously appropriate articulation in the carpet-like weavings of his taches [spots] and in his strata-like multiple deposits of paint layers. Every tache is a reservoir of energy states, and it is only through their interaction that the representation of nature comes about. Analogous to the effective principles of nature, both the gesture of the tache and the texture of the image are presented undisguised. And in this way Cézanne's accepted understanding of nature—"nature is not on the surface", or: "nature is always the same but nothing stays constant in its visible appearance"—is precipitated out of his way of painting, in the aesthetic construction of his work: "the paintings actually seem to be skinned"¹². For Cézanne nature is not something pre-existing but something which builds itself, something that is constantly becoming. Like Carus he thinks of nature in terms of process, as a *natura naturans*, a creative nature, which on account of its permanent state of becoming can never become petrified into a *natura naturata*, an already come about or created nature. Like Carus, Cézanne does not create landscape prospects but landscape organisms. But, even more rigorously, he examines the actual logic of painting and attempts to create reality anew with painterly methods—with the permanent goal in front of him of the *réalisation* of nature as image, as it was expressed by him in a central concept of his aesthetic thinking. In this way, the profusion of ambiguous visual connections, which is already contained within the single daub, this "systematic overwhelming of seeing, which Cézanne connects to each daub", can be read as "a quality of nature: as its profusion, the ability to renew itself, as its potential"¹³.



Ill. 3 Rainer Eisch, *mr_broum*,
Installation 2004

a natura naturans or in the words of Max Raphael dedicated to Cézanne a “terra creatrix in the state of creare”¹⁴. And Rainer Eisch has found his own visual equivalent for the process character of nature, so that its energetic activity is itself inscribed in the process of the image. It is not just that the cycle of natural processes finds its media equivalent in the loop and endless film. When the artist copies digitally generated images onto 16 mm film by means of a computer interface and animation camera and afterwards combines the 16 mm projector with a 35 mm lens, then geological deep time becomes written by degrees into the deep structures of these media fractures.¹⁵ The metamorphosing geological tectonics that are in a state of constant transformation, the cracks of strata, find their visual analogy in a technical bricolage of diverse media, layered behind, over and under each other and perpetually transforming into each other. “*mr_broum*” is a media realisation of the process of nature, in some sense in actu.¹⁶ In this sense Rainer Eisch is not only simulating nature. He is duplicating it on the level of media and realising in this way quite literally a true “*Erdlebenbild*”.

Translated from the German by Lucy Harvey

“*mr_broum*” (Ill. 3) has a conceptual kinship with this idea. Like Cézanne, and also like Carus, Rainer Eisch produces anything but a plagiarism of nature. Like them he uses at first glance ‘unnatural’ artistic methods to recreate nature as both a structured state and as process, as an aggregate of duration and transformation. His image of reality is also clearly

¹ Kurt Steinmann: Afterword. “Grenzscheide zweier Welten – Petrarca’s Besteigung des Mont Ventoux,” in: Francesco Petrarca: *Die Besteigung des Mont Ventoux*. Latin/German. Trans./ed. Kurt Steinmann. Stuttgart 1995, 39-49, here: 40.

² Jacob Burckhardt: *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien. Ein Versuch*. Reprint, ed. Konrad Hoffmann. Stuttgart 1985, 203.

³ Ruth Groh/Dieter Groh: “Petrarca und der Mont Ventoux”, quoted in Steinmann (as in note 1), 67.

⁴ See recent Thomas Hensel: “Bildersturm und Landschaft. Ikonoklastische Impulse “autonomer” Landschaftsdarstellung in der Frühen Neuzeit,” in: Norbert Nußbaum/Claudia Euskirchen/Stephan Hoppe (eds.): *Wege zur Renaissance. Beobachtungen zu den Anfängen neuzeitlicher Kunstauffassung im Rheinland und den Nachbargebieten um 1500*. Cologne 2003, 390-423; fundamental is Christopher S. Wood: *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape*. London/Chicago 1993.

⁵ See Richard Hoppe-Sailer: “Carl Gustav Carus. Einige Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Kunst und Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert,” in: *Die Erfindung der Natur. Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Wols und das surreale Universum*. Exhibition Catalogue. Sprengel Museum Hannover, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Rupertinum, Salzburg, eds. Karin Orchard/Jörg Zimmermann. Freiburg im Breisgau 1994, 67-73. All Carus quotes are as in Hoppe-Sailer, *ibid.* (translation Lucy Harvey) See also “Carl Gustav Carus: Briefe über Landschaftsmalerei (1815-1835),” in: Werner Busch (ed.): *Landschaftsmalerei (Geschichte der klassischen Bildgattungen in Quellentexten und Kommentaren*, vol. 3). Berlin 1997, 260-266.

⁶ See Christa Lichtenstern: “Metamorphose in der Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts.” vol. 1: *Die Wirkungsgeschichte der Meta-morphosenlehre Goethes. Von Philipp Otto Runge bis Joseph Beuys*. Weinheim 1990.

⁷ For a history of ideas relating to the concept of a living earth see Horst Bredekamp: “Die Erde als Lebewesen,” in: *Kritische Berichte. Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften*, 9, 1981, 4/5, 5-37.

⁸ To these theorems see among others Werner Busch: “Der Berg als Gegenstand von Naturwissenschaft und Kunst. Zu Goethes geologischem Begriff,” in: *Goethe und die Kunst*. Exhibition catalogue. Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar, ed. Sabine Schulze. Ostfildern-Ruit 1994, 485-497.

⁹ See Gottfried Boehm: *Paul Cézanne. Montagne Sainte-Victoire*. Frankfurt am Main 1988. All Cézanne quotes are cited from Boehm (translation Lucy Harvey), *ibid.* See also *Cézanne. Vollendet – Unvollendet*. Exhibition catalogue. Kunstforum Wien, Kunsthaus Zürich, ed. Felix Baumann/Evelyn Benesch/Walter Feilchenfeldt/Klaus Albrecht Schröder. Ostfildern-Ruit 2000.

¹⁰ For the origins and influence of this topos see, among others, Erich Rothacker: *Das Buch der Natur. Materialien und Grundsätzliches zur Metapherngeschichte*. Bonn 1979; and Hans Blumenberg: *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*. Frankfurt am Main 1981.

¹¹ Boehm (as in note 9), 115.

¹² *ibid.* 98.

¹³ *ibid.* 104.

¹⁴ Max Raphael: “Wie will ein Kunstwerk gesehen sein?,” quoted in Boehm (as in note 9), 102.

¹⁵ For the idea of deep time from the perspective of scientific history see Stephen Jay Gould: *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle. Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological time*. Cambridge (Mass) 1987; and for an adaptation of the same through media theory Siegfried Zielinski: *Archäologie der Medien. Zur Tiefenzeit des technischen Hörens und Sehens*. Reinbek bei Hamburg 2002.

¹⁶ See Thomas Hensel: “Albrecht Dürer, Erwin Panofsky und der ‘performative turn’ der Kunstwissenschaft,” in: Thomas Hensel/Hans Ulrich Reck/Siegfried Zielinski (eds.): *Goodbye, Dear Pigeons. Lab – Jahrbuch 2001/02 für Künste und Apparate*. Cologne 2002, 330-338.