

## The Whistle

Natural and Artificial Intruders in Contemporary Artistic Research

Marco Antonini



*But hark! There is the whistle of the locomotive - the long shriek, harsh above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony. It tells a story of busy men, citizens, from the hot street, who have come to spend a day in a country village, men of business; in short of all uniqueness; and no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace. As our thoughts repose again, after this interruption, we find ourselves gazing up at the leaves, and comparing their different aspect, the beautiful diversity of green...*

This is the transcription of a note from 1844, found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's diaries and reported in Leo Marx's influential *The Machine in the Garden*, a book that, along with David Nye's *American Technological Sublime* and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, has been on my desk for years. As Marx and Nye both point out, the image of a romantic wanderer interrupted in his en plein air meditations by the sound of an approaching locomotive reappears in an almost verbatim form in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1845) and shape-shifts into a plethora of other passages from various milestones of American literature. Among the dozens of provocative and mind-opening ideas and images found in the aforementioned books (input that contributed to inspire three exhibitions I curated in New York for Galou Gallery, Japan Society and Elizabeth Foundation between 2006 and 2009 as well as lectures delivered at Japan Society and 3rd Ward Design Center) the sonic presence of that whistle had the longest staying power.

The disruptive locomotive whistles recorded by Hawthorne and Thoreau are part of a larger narrative embedded in the Northern American obsession with railroads and the symbolic meaning that these colossal enterprises had in the mind of those who participated - or even simply witnessed - their frantic development. Railroads changed Northern America's perception of nature and the relationship that the

country had in regards to conquering its way to an ideal "West," with everything that that cultural process involved. Both writers describe the sensation of confusion and surprise caused by technology's intrusion into the idyllic countryside with great sensibility. The cold shriek of the locomotive is a metaphor for all technological progress, an unstoppable force pushing towards the remote corners of a planet finally conquered. It violates nature's sacred silence and, in doing so, it is a real difference from the new landscapes designed by humanity; it is an urgent call to redefine our relationship to the natural "other."

Hawthorne and Thoreau's initial puzzlement (and disappointment) traces back to two classic *Et In Arcadia Ego* paintings by Nicolas Poussin. In the iconic 1637-38 version [p. 136], now at the Louvre, intense ontological implications are developed with great compositional rigor and clarity. As in most of Poussin's art, emotions are addressed in general terms, channeled by stylized and theatrically arranged human figures in classical garb. Poussin's idea of human death is aseptically encased in a stone sarcophagus. No skulls and bones<sup>1</sup> or other graphic allusions to human anatomy are necessary; no foul smells permeate the timeless walls of this perfect construction. The shepherd's encounter with death and the epiphany that follows are conveyed in a completely intellectualized manner. The scene struck me as somewhat analogous to the famous scene in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (a film loosely based on Arthur Clarke's short story *The Sentinel*) in which primates meet a mysterious black monolith, an eternal bearer of knowledge and civilization. In Kubrick's scenario, civilization and progress exist only in otherworldly form, present to the eyes, ears and brains of a humanity that is itself still in full development. Compared to those irascible sub-humans, Poussin's peasants are in a much more ambiguous and complicated position, as it is *their* own world that's intruding into the idyllic perfection of nature. Human hands have

fabricated the crude structure, to the purpose of encasing a dead human body. Human intelligence has inscribed the wise *Memento Mori* epitaph on its surface. Humanity's illusion of a totally "other" nature is shattered into pieces as the simple minds of Poussin's characters struggle to figure out the historical threads and circumstances that might have brought such a powerful man-made signifier into the dark recesses of wilderness. Similarly to the locomotive's whistle, the monolithic sarcophagus resonates with the white noise of humanity's unstoppable clamor, minus the technological connotations and fear of progress. An object of the past, Poussin's sarcophagus is nonetheless the tangible proof not only of the existence of other men, but of the idea of humanity itself. All hope of an Arcadian alternative is lost.

There is a breadcrumb trail of "whistle" moments, scattered throughout art history. The overwhelming quantity and significance of such examples stretch from Romanticism to early-70s Land Art and would deserve separate discussion and extensive research. I will therefore limit myself to highlighting how cultural and technological development has contributed to inspiring radical new takes on the humanity vs. nature dichotomy dilemma in contemporary visual arts. Several artists have directly or indirectly questioned this polar duality, often pushing towards its dissolution. I will use a handful of works to exemplify my point.

I first met Cyprien Gaillard's work while doing research leading to my 2009 Elizabeth Foundation exhibition *Are We There Yet?* In the artist's own words, Technology (Humanity's major product, in terms of environmental impact) can be seen as an "Entropy Accelerator. An activity that produces more waste before it produces anything else."<sup>2</sup> From Gaillard's point of view Nature and Humanity are united in an irresistible vocation to self-destruction - a perennial change in which technology is seen as an agent of natural transformation. In his 2009 video

*Pruitt-Igoe Falls* [p. 127] Gaillard's camera follows the spectacular demolition of a public housing unit, cross-fading the ensuing smoke cloud of debris with a more colorful cloud. As it turns out, the context in which the second image has been recorded is very different from the first: the artist has transported us in a once pristine natural environment, and made us passive onlookers of a garish, tourist-friendly light show projected onto the majestic mist "curtain" of Niagara Falls. In Gaillard's work, architecture is often compared to geological matter and conceived as a natural phenomenon in itself. The work of man is subject to the same entropic forces that create, shape and destroy the natural world. The earlier video series *Real Remnants of Fictive Wars* [p. 128] offers an even more graphic visualization of humanity's intermission into nature's apparently autonomous reality. In the videos (all completely silent), clouds of smoke raise slowly, completely unannounced, contaminating various wild and not-so-wild stretches of countryside framed by Gaillard's film camera. It is a simple trick, inspired by years of high-school *bona fide* vandalism (a hidden friend operates a fire extinguisher, probably "borrowed" by some surrounding gas station.) Gaillard's ominous clouds and heavy, environmentally unconscious hand resonate with the intensity of Hawthorne's whistle. It doesn't surprise that one of the scenarios used in this series is a railway underpass - with no train in sight.

While the artificial white smoke in *Real Remnant's*... retains a certain degree of ambiguity in light of its similarity with other natural phenomena (e.g. fire, or steam), Carlos Irijalba's *Twilight* [p.135] a stadium-style lighting unit displaced to the middle of a forest near Santander, Spain, is conceived as a ruthlessly and uncompromisingly technological intrusion. Digitally recorded by multiple cameras and video cameras, the beam of light spreads over the deep darkness of the sleeping woods. Did this place, this slice of untouched nature even exist before this moment? The white halogen





lights seem to scream that yes, this is happening right now. Still, we are only here because of the monstrous organizational effort, labor and consequent financial and energy expenditure that dragging this absolutely urban fixture to this remote corner has implied for Irijalba and his team. The scorching hot, yet blindingly cold light reads as a signifier of humanity, of its ability (or perverted need) to modify the natural world in order to fully acknowledge it.

A similar approach is used by New Mexico-based Bill Dolson. In his work the rural landscape of the American West is seen less as an inviolate wilderness and more as an arena of active involvement. Dolson's eclectic background includes a stint as rancher, a pragmatic experience that has probably influenced his entire approach to Land Art. In his projects, Dolson boasts a fast-forward, modernist attitude that sees little or no difference between humanity and nature. I remember receiving this image [p. 132] from him, in an email thread which probably featured snippets of our ongoing discussion of all things Land Art: it was a bean crop, in New Mexico, being systematically burned down to prepare the soil for (chemical) fertilization. It looked like the most spectacular earthwork to me; nothing but the most mundane of sightings to him. I then realized how deep the disconnection between most of us and the contemporary reality of nature is, and how largely we all depend on preservationist politics to help us sustain a projected image of Nature that is in larger part a pacifier for the same yearning shattered by the brutal apparition of Poussin's *Et In Arcadia Ego* monument. Some of Dolson's most simple and recognizable installations use laser beamers as a disruptive agent with both positive and negative connotations. In *4 x 4 Vertical Planar Intersection: Ponderosa Pine* (2005) [p. 133], the ghostly presence of a pine tree is illuminated by the collision with an orthogonally arranged battery of laser beamers. The frigid linear precision of the beamers meets its match in the entropic surface of the tree, dissolving in

a myriad of apparently unrelated segments and reflections. This otherworldly image brings to mind the feverish flashes of Darren Aronowsky's 1997 movie  $\pi$ , in which the protagonist obsesses over apparently insignificant natural details, desperately trying to find a universal mathematical formula behind them; the effort (spoiler alert) eventually drives him crazy.

The general widespread ignorance of technology's reach into the inner workings of the natural world also surfaces as an indirect topic in Trevor Paglen's recent series of photographs *The Other Night Sky*. At a first glance, this collection of panoramic landscapes seems to flirt with the grandiose brand of large-canvas Romanticism proper of painters like Albert Bierstadt but, as in many other works of Paglen's, the smallest details are key. In *Keyhole Improved Crystal from Glacier Point (Optical Reconnaissance Satellite; USA 186)* (2008), the cosmic perfection of a dramatic starry night sky/monumental rock formation combo is violated by the passage of a single, minuscule straight line. The hair-thin light trace is actually a classified secret services surveillance satellite. Disguised as just another astronomical object, the satellite and its unnaturally linear movement are powerful reminders of the invisible web of powers and interests that mediate our experience of this world. Although Paglen's primary interest is in the political implications of such "other" objects (the collection of which includes military drones, secret prisons and CIA flight routes,) [p. 124, 131] his photographs have the interesting side effect of suggesting a new perception of natural landscapes as possible scenarios of global conflict and controversy, releasing them from their prescribed role as postcard-perfect places for social decompression and relax.

In conclusion, I would like to mention a multi-year project by the Italian duo Isola and Norzi that inverts the pattern of most works cited so far by positing a natural biological process as "whistle". Presented as a composite solo





show (and book project) at Art in General in 2010, Isola and Norzi's series *Liquid Door* is a powerful reflection on the boundaries between humanity and nature. The project identifies a grey zone in which the narrative of human progress can be reconnected to the inner workings of the natural world. The choice of underwater landscapes is particularly intriguing, as these remote areas are among the few truly unexplored and unconquered corners of planet Earth. Taking the lead from Jacques Cousteau's experiments with an underwater living unit (once perfectly functional but now abandoned in the depths of the Red Sea), the artists conducted a series of experiments in New York's Coney Island Aquarium, experimenting both with underwater sculptures and photographic projects that dealt with the behind-the-scene life of the aquarium. *Large Glass*, a photographic diptych from this series, summarizes the artists' interests and intentions very well [p. 137]. Allowing a precisely delineated rectangular area on the glass of one of the aquarium's fish tanks to remain unclean for a month and a half, the artists created a stunning, semi-transparent abstract work. From the visitors' perspective, the rust/lime/green rectangle looks both beautiful and disquieting. The geometry of the rectangle clashes with the carefully reconstructed seabed of the aquarium, revealing its totally artificial nature by exposing the painstaking maintenance necessary to its survival. In this case, it is not humanity (or one of its many instruments) to steamroll through an illusion of natural perfection, but nature itself. Still, the vibrant surface of slimy bacteria and algae in *Large Glass* and its stringent geometrical logic is a wake-up call from an idealized dream whose subject, in this case, was not even an actual natural environment, but a sophisticated reconstruction of a minuscule portion of it.

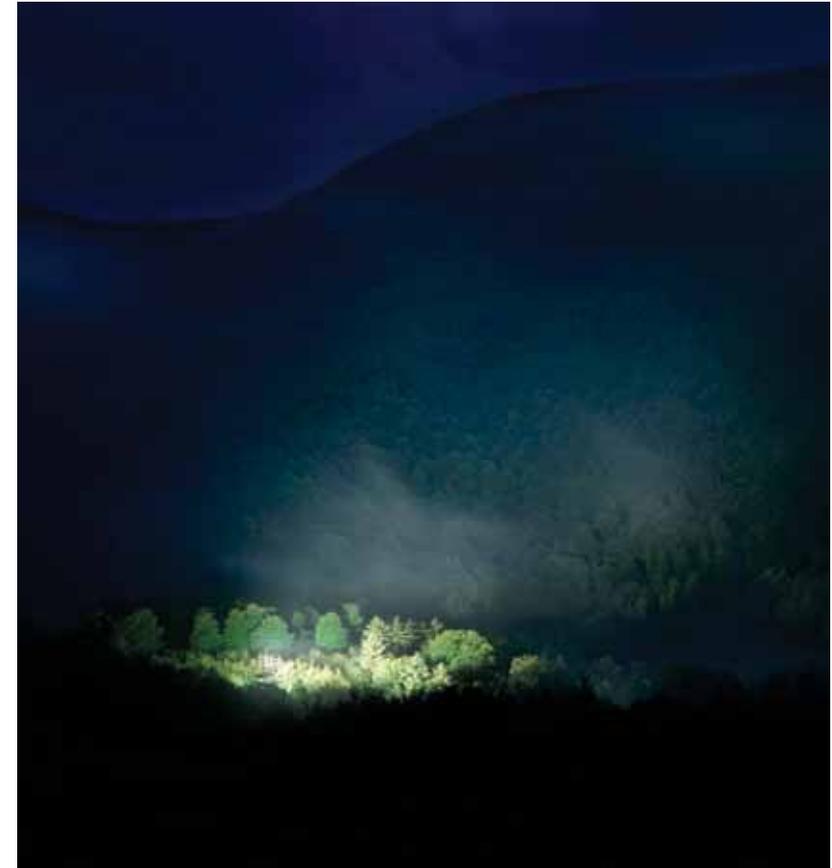
The analysis of contemporary artworks that have or are currently posing questions about (or contributed to reinforce our awareness of) the cultural and historical aspects that define

Nature, its ontology and our ever-evolving relationship to it could go on and on. A large part of humanity has demonstrated a constant need (some might say an obsession) to expand their boundaries, move on, and look further throughout history. Extending and streamlining the form and function of nature itself is a seemingly desperate effort to adapt them to the speed, depth and quality of contemporary life, an experience whose pace and ever-upgradable goals are now mostly set by technology. In this sense, Hawthorne's whistle and its countless echoes are revealing of humanity's addiction to perennial change, development, "progress". Whether the product of personal expression or concerned with our disruptive power, agency and increasing responsibility towards environmental conservation, contemporary art is effectively contributing to spark a global reflection on humanity's destructive attraction towards nature, its willingness to re-shape it and its (thus-far) utopian desire to enhance it.

1 Well visible, for example, in Guercino's 1618-22 rendition of the same *Et in Arcadia Ego* theme, now at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome.

2 Interview with the author. Published on the exhibition brochure of *Are We There Yet?*, Elizabeth Foundation, NY, 2008. (<http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/4895>)

**Marco Antonini** is Gallery Director at NURTUREart, a Brooklyn-based non profit organization dedicated to providing exhibition opportunities and resources for both emerging artists and curators. Previously, he worked as an independent curator and writer. He occasionally teaches Art History at New Jersey City University.





## LIST OF WORKS

### Cyprien Gaillard

p. 127: *Pruitt-Igoe Falls*, 2009

DVD, 6:55 min.

p. 128-129: *Real Remnants of Fictive Wars II*, 2004

35 mm film transferred to DVD, 7:14 min.

Courtesy Galerie BUGADA & CARGNEL, Paris / Sprüth Magers, Berlin, London / Laura Bartlett Gallery, London

### Trevor Paglen

p. 124: *PAN* (Unknown; USA-207), 2010

C-Print, 152,4 x 121,9 cm

p. 131: *Reaper Drone* (*Indian Springs, NV Distance ~ 2 miles*), 2010

C-Print, 76,2 x 91,4 cm

p. 131: *Four Geostationary Satellites Above the Sierra Nevada*, 2007

C-Print, 122 x 152 cm

© Trevor Paglen

Courtesy Galerie Thomas Zander, Köln and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco

### Bill Dolson

p. 132: *Beancrop in New Mexico*

p. 133: *4 x 4 Vertical Planar Intersection: Ponderosa Pine*, 2005.

Variable Dimensions, C-Print on Kodak Metal Gloss Paper

Courtesy the artist

### Carlos Irijalba

p. 135: *Twilight 14*, 2009

C-Print, 190x180cm

Courtesy the artist

### Nicolas Poussin

p. 136: *Et in Arcadia Ego*, 1637–1638

Oil on canvas, 87 cm × 120 cm

Collection Musée du Louvre

### Isola and Norzi

p. 137: *Large Glass*, 2010

'Abstract' painting installation caused by natural settling of algae on the glass of the tropical fish-tank, Coney Island Aquarium, NY (view and detail)

Photographic diptych, Plexiglas and lambda print, 30 x 20cm and 80 x 54cm

Courtesy the artists

