Figure and Field in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The following thoughts will inevitably find themselves in the service of a central idea: the creation of a discursive common ground – that is, the production of a set of assumptions, beliefs and common terms that find acceptance and use, and which form the basis for conversation and dialogue. So, in the simple act of gathering a group of essays under the title “Making Ground”, we have created a discursive commons that allows discrete and unique thoughts and ideas to find expression. This notion – the creation of a discursive commons – is the guiding theme of this essay, where it begins and where it will end. It is also very important to note that (although I do not think it is the case in this instance) a discursive commons can be created through evasion as much as through attraction: by advancing or proposing a theme that is somehow repellant to an existing field of discourse, a new common ground can be created. Therefore, the overt rejection of a discursive commons, or the rejection of a conceptual assertion, in many ways serves the same purpose as its acceptance.

The Waste Landscape as a Work of Art

I have spent the past few years studying the immanent remains of a cement-mining landscape in and around Rosendale, NY. This district, extending along a sixty-mile length of the Rondout Creek near Kingston, NY, developed quickly in the early decades of the nineteenth century as the country’s internal canal infrastructure demanded a source of hydraulic “natural” cement for mortar, which sets and remains hard under water (Werner and Burmeister 2007). Following this discovery, the area saw a rapid population increase with immigrant communities from Britain, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Slovenia,
Croatia, Italy and many other European nations. The construction of the Delaware and Hudson Canal, whose remains are still apparent along the length of the Rondout Creek and geological formation (Figure 1), was a primary factor in the rapid development of the limestone mines and associated industries that flourished during this time, such as bluestone quarrying and brick manufacture (Gilchrist 1976). The initial motivating purpose for the canal, as conceived by the brothers William and Maurice Wurts in 1823, was the transportation of anthracite coal from northeastern Pennsylvania to New York City. Once Portland cement was developed around 1900, Rosendale cement production disappeared as quickly as it arrived. Now densely overgrown, the lime kilns, railways and refinement structures around Rosendale bear witness to this massive industrial effort, but not without coaxing. A landscape often hides just as much as it reveals (Berger 1967); one must approach it in a circumspect manner in the same way that one handles an artifact, regarding its different aspects. Waste landscapes are particularly facetious, as T.S. Eliot conveys in his poem *The Waste Land* (Eliot 1922, 10).

Just as many of the people living around Rosendale refer to the mines as “caves”, they also, quite understandably, speak of the features surrounding the mines, such as the sections of the canal, debris fields and mine tailings, using terms such as “hill” “swamp” or “slope”. As a “landscape of subtraction” (Francaviglia 1991, 22), it is very difficult to discern the anthropogenic landscape features of the Rosendale Cement Mining District.
from what may be termed “natural”. About 150 years ago, a civil engineer who worked on the canal presciently foresaw this transformation with respect to it:

The Delaware and Hudson Canal which passes through the entire length of the county has become a fixed fact and in a few more years will come to be regarded as something which has always existed, like a mountain or a familiar stream […]. (McEntree, in Hoes 1910, 289)¹

In this essay, I would like to take seriously Francaviglia’s observation that a mining landscape is simultaneously “a work of utility and a work of art” (Francaviglia 1991, 66). I have found that my previous training as an artist has offered me conceptual tools that are very helpful when looking at, listening to and thinking about industrial and waste landscapes. As a foundational principle of art and music, I have found that the dynamic interplay between figure and field (and related concepts such as positive and negative space) is a very productive concept for thinking about how industrial and waste landscapes – and the human built environment in general – changes and is perceived over time. I am not proposing the existence of a conscious “guiding hand” that shapes the contours of the Anthropocene in the exact same manner as an artist on a canvas, but if one is able to gain a sense of objective distance, one can quickly discern patterns and deviations within the anthropogenic landscape that seem either to move forward or recede, like figurative or background elements in a painting, sculpture, print or song. When one creates a work of art, one often finds that these elements unexpectedly trade places, and one can suggest that a successful work of art achieves a final state that is a kind of visual dynamism or auditory dance, where the viewer or listener is inspired to linger and move within the work, constantly shifting their attention between figure and ground. A brief discussion of two specific paintings may serve as an occasion to think about a few implications of the figure–field visual relationship and how it might help us consider spaces of industrial abandonment.

The similarities between the act of painting and the work of archaeological excavation is made explicit by the title of Willem de Kooning’s masterpiece Excavation. In this painting, figurative and background elements rapidly change places within the picture frame, with underpainting and overpainting trading places. It is a dynamic painting full of motion. In discussing this painting and others in an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1994, art critic Peter Schjeldahl writes: “His art is not abstract, just relentlessly abstracting. Memories of depiction cling to every stroke. They contribute to a fabulous complexity that, as you look, can supercharge your capacity to maintain disparate thoughts simultaneously” (Schjeldahl 2019, 13). The interplay between foreground and background in de Kooning’s dense, angular composition causes one to muse that figurative elements, if repeated densely and widely enough, can themselves form the basis and substance for a new indistinct field. And to return to the theme of simultaneity, one could argue that the capacity of archaeological perception to discern simultaneous pasts is the cornerstone of the discipline, where it departs from historical narrative and charts its own territory.

¹ Although first published in 1910, details in the text suggest it was written ca. 1872.
Perhaps a more poignant and direct illustration of how artists contend with figure–ground relationships is offered by Francesco Goya’s mysterious painting *The Dog* (Figure 2). Although it is difficult to say for certain, a discernible change in paint color and surface treatment seems to suggest that Goya painted over a human figure that was once standing just to the right of the dog, a figure that may have been the focus of the dog’s attention, but is now missing. This obliteration of figure back into field (and vice versa) is a commonly demonstrable practice within the history of painting, as X-ray analysis of paintings has demonstrated and as working artists know by experience. Figure is subsumed into field, field is incorporated back into figurative elements, until a final composition is achieved. The poignancy of Goya’s possible decision to remove the standing human figure from this painting is heightened by a knowledge of the conditions that surrounded its creation. This painting was created among a group of others within Goya’s house, Quinta del Sordo (Villa of the Deaf Man), and is considered to be
a part of a group of works known as the Black Paintings, which Goya created during a time of severe social upheaval and difficulty. Although one can interpret this painting in ever so many ways (and hence its power as a work of art), one can simply look at it formally as a struggle between figuration and its opposite – the inchoate, chaos, the fearful unknown. It seems that The Dog, as a gestural element of life and willful action, is nearly immersed in the painterly masses that surround it, and as there is a general consensus that Goya painted over large portions of previous work, it is the omission of The Dog from this trend that makes its presence so poignant. Thinking about the absent figure to the right of the dog, Frankel writes:

It isn’t clear whether Goya chose to paint this figure out, or if it is part of an earlier painting showing through the thinned oil paint. Was this remaining trace an accident? I think it’s a concealment; a failed deletion. Goya was attempting to eradicate something. Did he take pity on the dog, removing the source of its fear, or was there something that he didn’t want to see looking back at him from the wall of his studio? (Frankel 2016)

The reason for this art-historical introduction becomes apparent when we consider that waste landscapes are frequently referred to as “brownfields” within heritage management and real estate discourse – a term that conjures an indistinct zone of homogenous material, nameless, faceless, often composed of broken concrete, brick, sand, slag and other by-products of extraction, construction and demolition, so similar to the detritus of war (see also Gardner, forthcoming), and at times similar, in fact, to the color and texture to the coffee-brown fresco of Goya’s painting, where one could even propose that Goya’s dog is peeking at his missing master over a mound of rubble. The brownfield is a terminus, it is an anti-node of extreme neglect within the cyclical nature of industrial landscape change. Although its formation is complex and multi-faceted, it can be seen as an end result of corporate consolidation and liquidation, which seems to be a ubiquitous phenomenon when studying the industrial past of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As an important factor in the creation of the waste landscapes of modernity, corporate consolidation takes on the same character as the introduction or imposition of a homogenous field within a painting; it is a transition from frenetic, diverse and dynamic activity to a homogenous buzz, to eventual homogeneity and stasis. A brief discussion of the consolidation frenzy of the late nineteenth century may be in order at this point.

Corporate Consolidation and The Field of the Anthropocene

To save costs and achieve horizontal (acquisition of all infrastructure and facilities) and vertical (control of all managerial operations) integration, companies have tended to pool their resources to maximize profits. The philosophy and justification of massive corporate consolidation is sometimes mirrored by its historians, such as (the ironically named) Fields, who notes that consolidation was a “logical course of action”, because it functioned to “eliminate duplicate services” (Fields 1997, 6). Corporate consolidation was a regional and national trend, and any analysis of its genesis reveals causes of both regional and national scope. In the case of the Rosendale Cement Mining District (Figure 3), corporate consolidation was achieved by Samuel Coykendall, who created
the Consolidated Rosendale Cement Company in 1902 as demand for natural cement was decreasing in favor of Portland cement, in the process attaining an “almost uninterrupted swath of land from Rosendale to Kingston” (Werner 2006, 29). This was a national trend, supported by underlying social Darwinist assumptions of “survival of the fittest”, which suggest that unchecked expansion was the “natural” course of things. While there are certainly examples to be found of individual industrial efforts that are exceptions to this, the Consolidated Rosendale Cement Company was a representative example of a corporate structure that emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century, a way of doing things that has swept the earth.

Presently, the Rosendale Cement Mining District is an archaeological site of historic significance. The houses that comprise the towns of Rosendale, Bloomington and High Falls, to name a few, are also time capsules whose presence informs visitors of an important era in the history of the extractive industries in the United States. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this location is its discreet, definable boundaries. Whereas the footprint of many towns and industrial sites changes dramatically over time, Rosendale – although not entirely immune to this trend – has maintained an integrity of place. There is very little encroachment of structures that depart from the original worker housing built in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Many of these houses maintain their original massing. The mines and cement mill sites, although largely stripped of their original structures, retain their concrete foundations, the physical traces of the varied refining processes and coopering that took place there. There is one main road leading into, and out of, the town. This relative isolation allows for a certain “frozen in time” quality, although of course many of the houses have been structurally modified with additions and repairs.

The consolidation of redundant processes and facilities in an industrial landscape mirrors the reduction of figurative elements and their subsummation into an undifferentiated field within painting or printmaking. Fittingly, as it stands in the present day, Rosendale is what one might call an “artsy” town, with galleries, studios and small shops sprinkled along the main street, illustrating a further transition and distinction between kinds of fields: from “brownfield” to “playground”. The sculptural quality of the folded and buckled terrain, in combination with the spectral ubiquity of industrial remains, has attracted institutions and artists who have made Rosendale both a home and a laboratory of postindustrial artistic research. The undifferentiated, homogenous “wasteland” of industrial redundancy has a counterpart in the emotional lives of the inhabitants, manifesting as a kind of common ground of forgetfulness, a suspension of disbelief, a cultivated sense of oblivion, a willful surrender to wonder and marvel at the ruins even as the tales and stories of the days of extractive prosperity are well within living memory and local historical accounts. This kind of conscious unconsciousness, or – to offer the phrase of a local resident, Mick Taussig – “mastery of non-mastery” (Taussig 2020) has resulted in an openness to artistic experimentation, where performance spaces, galleries and museums are almost as numerous as cement ruins.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and tangible manifestations of this experimentation is the fact that the administrative borders of Rosendale as it now stands are – in fact – a work of art created by the conceptual artist Raivo Puusemp, who ran for mayor, won and then proceeded to eliminate an entire village as art. In the early 1970s Puusemp
moved to Rosendale from New York City and began teaching art at the nearby Ulster County Community College. In 1974, he ran for mayor on a platform of eliminating a redundant administrative district, Rosendale Village, that burdened Rosendale Township with high taxes and unnecessary bureaucracy. A fellow artist, Paul McCarthy, encouraged Puusemp to document the entire process, which he did, creating a book entitled Dissolution (Bliss 2016).

As I move in and around Rosendale I periodically make a point of reminding myself that I am moving within the physical administrative boundaries of a conceptual art piece. This fact has caused me to wonder how long conceptual artists have been doing such work before they are labeled “conceptual artists” or even identified as such. The project of the cement industrialists of the region was one of appropriation and expansion, while Puusemp’s project Dissolution could be considered a form of imaginative contraction, the consolidation of redundant forms, quite similar, in fact, to Samuel Coykenall’s terminal project, the creation of Consolidated Rosendale Cement Company, and it can be seen as a perpetuation of the cyclical movement of figure into field and vice versa. If there is any doubt regarding Puusemp’s level of intentionality and self-awareness in this process, it is dispelled by his own words:

> Esthetic structure and form can be applied equally well to social and political systems as physical ones. Most political structures lack formal concept and move from crisis to crisis. The lack of conceptual structure limits them to being responsive rather than initiative. […] Deliberate changes in political structures don’t just happen, they are planned and occur because they seem inevitable. To make changes seem inevitable requires a clear structure and a systematic process. (Puusemp 2012 [1980], 1)

Archaeologists would be well advised to be cognizant of the work of artists who operate in the social realm, who consider the social as a kind of palette (Kaprow 1993). This kind of work could be categorized differently, depending on the historical approach — situationism, fluxism, institutional critique — but it is important to note that while not overtly defined as “artists” per se, other individuals with powerful imaginative or creative visions have left their mark on the area, or continue to operate creatively within social structure.

**The Waste Landscape as Artistic Palette**

In 2017 and 2022, and as a component of my archaeological research into Rosendale cement and its associated industries — within this clearing, this zone of cultivated industrial amnesia — I organized two outdoor sculpture exhibits hosted by the Century House Historical Society (CHHS) and the Snyder Estate in Rosendale. Ironically, the thirty-acre property of the CHHS (Figure 4) is an artifact of one of the few resisters to corporate consolidation, and Andrew Snyder and the Century House Cement Company continued producing natural cement long after the other companies’ properties were purchased and sold off by Coykendall. In the relative absence of historical interpretation on site, artistic intervention flourishes at CHHS and associated institutions, such as the nearby Women’s Studio Workshop. The latest exhibit in 2022 was entitled An/Aesthetics, which I co-organized with Michael Asbill, a professor of art at SUNY.
As a tribute to Raivo Puusemp’s earlier intervention into the municipal structure of Rosendale, I reached out and invited him to be a part of An/Aesthetics, and he agreed to contribute a piece, Gamma, that he had previously created with his son, Ephraim and daughter, Kiersten (Figure 5).

The placement of Gamma upon a terraced field of waste rock can be seen, in part, as an example of an artist introducing a figurative element into the discursive commons, the common ground of industrial ruination. Francaviglia clarifies his observation that mining landscapes, as “landscapes of subtraction” in truth have qualities akin to the process of sculpture, which are both additive and subtractive (Francaviglia 1991, 137). One of the major challenges for a mining operation is to find a place to put all the waste rock, or whatever is not considered ore (material that can be mined for a profit) at the time of removal:

Ore is a mixture of minerals, one or more of which are sought, and the rest of which have no economic value (called gangue), which can be mined at a profit. Please note that is the miner’s definition of ore. A geologist’s definition of ore does not include the economic component.

(Quivik, pers. comm., 26 March, 2022)

Due to the rapidity of repopulation by plant species, it has become difficult to discern the natural from the cultural, but one indicator of the placement of waste rock and tailings.
is symmetry and repetition, as evidenced by a field of terraced waste rock that cascades down from the mine entrance. 

*Gamma* was an exploration of the interstellar medium – in this case gamma particles – and an invitation to contemplate both the vastness and immanence of deep space. Composed of four Geiger counters attached to amplifiers, we located *Gamma* upon this terraced field, and viewers and listeners were able to sit on two benches and contemplate as the Geiger counters registered the passage of gamma particles moving through them: “pop… pop-pop, pop…”:

Because of their infinitesimal size, gamma rays can pass through the unoccupied space that is within and between the atoms that comprise all matter. They can pass through all of the molecules that make up the human body. The vast majority are passing right through you right now as though you are not even here. At any given instant, the cosmos is simultaneously outside and inside all of us. (Puusemp *et al.* 2022)

The placement of *Gamma* upon the Rosendale landscape naturally invites a rather interesting dialogue with Puusemp’s earlier, overtly political conceptual piece, *Dissolution*. Whereas the latter involved active participation and commentary on the political process of democracy – the *made ground* of political discourse – the former was a gestural invitation to listen to the ultimate source of all matter in the universe, causing one to momentarily set aside all hubristic ambitions of *Homo faber* and humbly admit that – to
modify a phrase from V. Gordon Childe – *ground makes itself*. Historical, geological and astronomical awareness as well as recent catastrophic events in Türkiye (6 February, 2023) remind us that “we live on the thin, fragile skin of a planet that is – metaphorically speaking – alive” (Raymo and Raymo 1989, 20).

The perpetually shifting dialogue between figure and field is, ultimately, one of shifting appearances. In a Lidar image of the vicinity of Greenkill Road near Rosendale (Figure 6), we can see how the anthropogenic linear accentuation of pre-existing landscape transitions has helped to create something that resembles a human figure, wearing a rain hat and overcoat, with a strap that crosses diagonally across his shoulder (Greenkill Road). Following John Latham’s reimagining of a waste heap in West Lothian in Scotland, *Niddrie*

![FIGURE 6. Greenkill Man, Lidar imagery near Kingston, NY (USGS National Map Viewer).](image-url)
“Woman” (see Richardson 2012) – and while it is only partially the product of anthropogenic processes – I have named this figure Greenkill Man. In this image we can see how anthropogenic landscape transformations, such as placing a road or railroad parallel to a stream or at the base of a hill, rather than obliterating natural landscape features, tends to accentuate them in the same way that an artist might alter the line weight of a drawing. However, since one characteristic of this figure–field dynamic is its ever-shifting nature, we might do well to keep note of how gender appearances were (and in many ways, still are) presented in the vicinity of mid-nineteenth century Rosendale:

Young ladies of Bloomingdale, evidently dissatisfied with their gentle sex, have established a practice of amusing themselves by dressing up in their “big brothers’” clothes, and “fooling folks” with their pretended manly acts. (New Paltz Independent 1873)

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Sometimes, as in the case of visual art where figure and field suddenly seem to shift roles, a melody can become a steady drone – a form of conspicuous repetition, or “enrichment through accumulation”, as repetition is defined by the music scholars Augoyard and Torgue (2005). A miner lives out his remaining days upon a mountain of gangue, or waste rock, just as a scholar is content to live out their remaining days resting upon an accumulated mountain of forgotten texts. As an example, the terraced landscape of waste rock in and around Rosendale constitutes the shared foundation for several homes of mining families as well as the accumulated archive of the local historical society, with stacks upon stacks of dusty books. In general this entire assemblage poses a challenge for the rational chatter of urban day-centric discourse. An attentiveness to this phenomenon is the movement from Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2005) to what I have proposed as the “retrieval of the insensible”: the leftovers, the waste, the gangue-thoughts of the Anthropocene.

Whereas the cement industrialists of Rosendale were engaged in the ongoing anticipatory pursuit of the next peak musical figure, the rural remnants of the extractive industries continue to sing the same terse incantatory rhyming couplets that are conducive to repetitive action and hard work. The urban aesthetic form has its counterpart in the rural anesthetic form, for it is true within landscapes of subtraction, just as in medical practice, that the anesthetic is a close partner of extraction. In his poem The Music of Failure, Bill Holm begins with the line “The ground bass is failure; America is the key signature” (Holm 1985, 1) – and we can see this interplay between figure and field, melody and alliteration throughout the entire industrial saga.

*If rocks had no memory they would probably float* – Renata Del Riego

During the initial preparatory phase of the exhibit An/Aesthetics, I invited prospective artists to visit the property of Century House Historical Society to consider the placement of their sculptures. We walked the ground and discussed options, and I offered some brief historical background. As organizers, Asbill and I made no overt or explicit requirements other than expressions of cautionary practicalities. While some artists...
already had a clear idea of what they were going to make, others were quite curious about the history of the site. During a walk with the artist Renata Del Riego (Figure 7), we began to talk about memory and forgetfulness. We talked about the brothers Hypnos and Thanatos of Greek mythology – the gods of sleep and death respectively – how they lived together in the same cave with the river of forgetfulness, Lethe, flowing nearby. Many of the mine entrances around Rosendale present a similar appearance: cavernous spaces that are half filled with ground water, conjuring associations of the underworld. While the possible archetypical associations of figure and field are endless, Del Riego’s artistic intervention within the waste landscape of Rosendale offers one important and final parallel to memory and forgetfulness. Within the waste landscapes of the Anthropocene, isolated and distinct figurative forms are tantamount to memory (or memorials), whereas field or ground becomes the indistinct realm of oblivion, forgetfulness, amnesia – itself composed of the densely concentrated forms of memory that refuse to be distinguishable. In a dream-like gesture of unreality, Del Riego momentarily isolated and suspended several rocks, as if pulling them from the bottom of the river Lethe, offering them momentary release from the onerous burden of memory. There is perhaps something to be learned from this: the ability to gracefully forget, just as Ricoeur has proposed that civilization might properly formulate an “ars oblivionis” as a counterpoint to Frances Yate’s “ars memoriae” as a way of combating the “hubris of total reflection” (Ricouer 2004, 412, 413).

References


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