


BORDERCROSSINGS

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AURA DYNAMICS

THE TASK OF THE SPECTATOR IN THE NEW ERA OF THE AURA

MARTHA LANGFORD

Two extraordinary photographic exhibitions have been mounted this winter by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography and the National Gallery of Canada. The CMCP's "Confluence" marks the 10th anniversary of the building at 1 Rideau Canal. Like the 1992 inaugural exhibition, "Beau," "Confluence" is a group show bringing together prints and installations by 17 artists, a thoughtful mix of established and emerging figures. "Confluence" celebrates and also proves that there



top: Kelly Wood, *Yellow Bags*, 2001, 10 Chromogenic prints, 130.8 x 71.1 cm. Courtesy the artist, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto.

facing page: Damian Moppett, *Untitled (Impure Systems)*, 1999, Chromogenic print, 129.6 x 108.3 cm. Courtesy Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa.

is something substantial to celebrate. The exhibition makes a statement about photography today, not simply by tapping certain artists, but by putting their work into lucid correspondence. The conversation is intensified by the near presence of the National Gallery show—Edward Burtynsky's eagerly anticipated retrospective, "Manufactured Landscapes."

Both shows are spectacular; neither is pure, mindless spectacle. Visitors should be advised that they have their part to play in this photographic event.

Michael Snow said it best in the heyday of photo-conceptualism: "There should be a rise in the intensity of the attention paid to art equal to the rise in quality. Unless the audience does some work, provides some feedback, there can be no growth." "Confluence" demonstrates the perspicacity of Snow's remark, as well as the hardiness of Canadian conceptualism, however mutated since the '70s. A similar call to mental action can be heard echoing off the stones and metal surfaces photographed by Burtynsky: his grim visions of the earth have to be seen to be believed, then they need to be processed through our culture's continued complacency about the earth. If we see "Manufactured Landscapes" and go away simply thrilled by what technology (the camera) can do, then we have missed the point entirely. Burtynsky's big colour photographs (two in "Confluence") mirror what we earthlings are up to in a language we can all understand.

"Confluence" shows that photography's relationship with the real takes an interesting new turn when we can acknowledge, and learn from, its boundaries—when the richness of tone, subtlety of colour and hallucinatory detail of imagery by Lynne Cohen, Burtynsky and Robert Bourdeau still leave us in Barthes's state of 'pensiveness'. Are we lulled by the rhythmic organization of these works, impressed by the correct vantage point, calmed by the artists' mastery of the scene? Well yes, we are, but this effect is only temporary, because these specific landscapes and interiors are also typological, and I mean that in the Biblical sense: they are predictive. Cohen's cavernous *Spa*, 2000, underscores our fear of decay and death by promising resurrection. The pairing of Burtynsky's *Oxford Tire Pile #8*, Westley, California, 1999, and *Oil Refineries #3*, Oakville, Ontario, 1999, makes grim, symmetrical sense of our free trade in ecological disasters. The melancholic industrial monuments visited through the 1990s by Bourdeau foreshadow the state of the monuments we are building today. These constructions are both striking and futile, the future signs of enterprise conceived on a massive scale and subsequently abandoned. Beautiful losers.

Capitalism's monuments to obsolescence are mimicked by Damian Moppett's improvised tabletop still

facing page, top: Raymonde April, *Tout Embrasser*, 2000, 16 mm black and white film, 58 minutes, presented on DVD. Courtesy the artist.

below: Angela Grauerholz, *La bibliothèque*, 1992, Azodye print, 122 x 183 cm. Courtesy the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

lives. His untitled photographs from 1999 feature stacks of unlike objects, teetering taxonomies that one tries in vain to stabilize with a name: Moppett calls them "Impure Systems"; "Confluence" curator Martha Hanna calls them "towers of Babel." Both refer to a proliferation of tongues, other voices, generally unheard. Hanna has underscored these allusions by bringing Moppett's work and Jeff Wall's into proximity in the gallery.

In Wall's black and white photograph, *House-keeping*, 1996, the hotel worker is exiting the room. The job is done; the restored room is ready to restore the traveller. The waiting space offers just what Matisse offered as a work of art: an armchair for the tired businessman. The exiting figure punctures the integrity of the unit, gives us a fleeting glance at the hall, but we are not meant to go with her. The organization of the picture and every element in it reinforces the integrity of the room as one box stacked on another box. The floors above bear down on this space and the weight of the room adds to the burden on the floors below. The traveller who stretches out on the patterned bedspread is just one more corpse in the crypt.

A large, studiously neutral image whets our appetite for context. We are trained to think outside the box. But copiousness, at least in this exhibition, functions the same way and seems almost a smoke-screen. It aggravates the sense that there is more to know—more that we should know. Do 500 images of family, friends and poetic landscapes constitute a life? Raymonde April's title, *Tout embrasser*, 2000, is poignant in its impossibility. Her 16mm film is a 58-minute presentation of pictures held up to the camera by the artist's hand. The work has been transferred to DVD so that it plays continuously in the exhibition. April is turning over her life when we enter the show; she is still at it when we depart. No single image gives proof of a person's existence, and no proliferation of images summarizes it. April is upheld by her determination to try. She is the visionary in a small, family-like community, capturing split seconds of intimacy—intimacy being the light of her world.

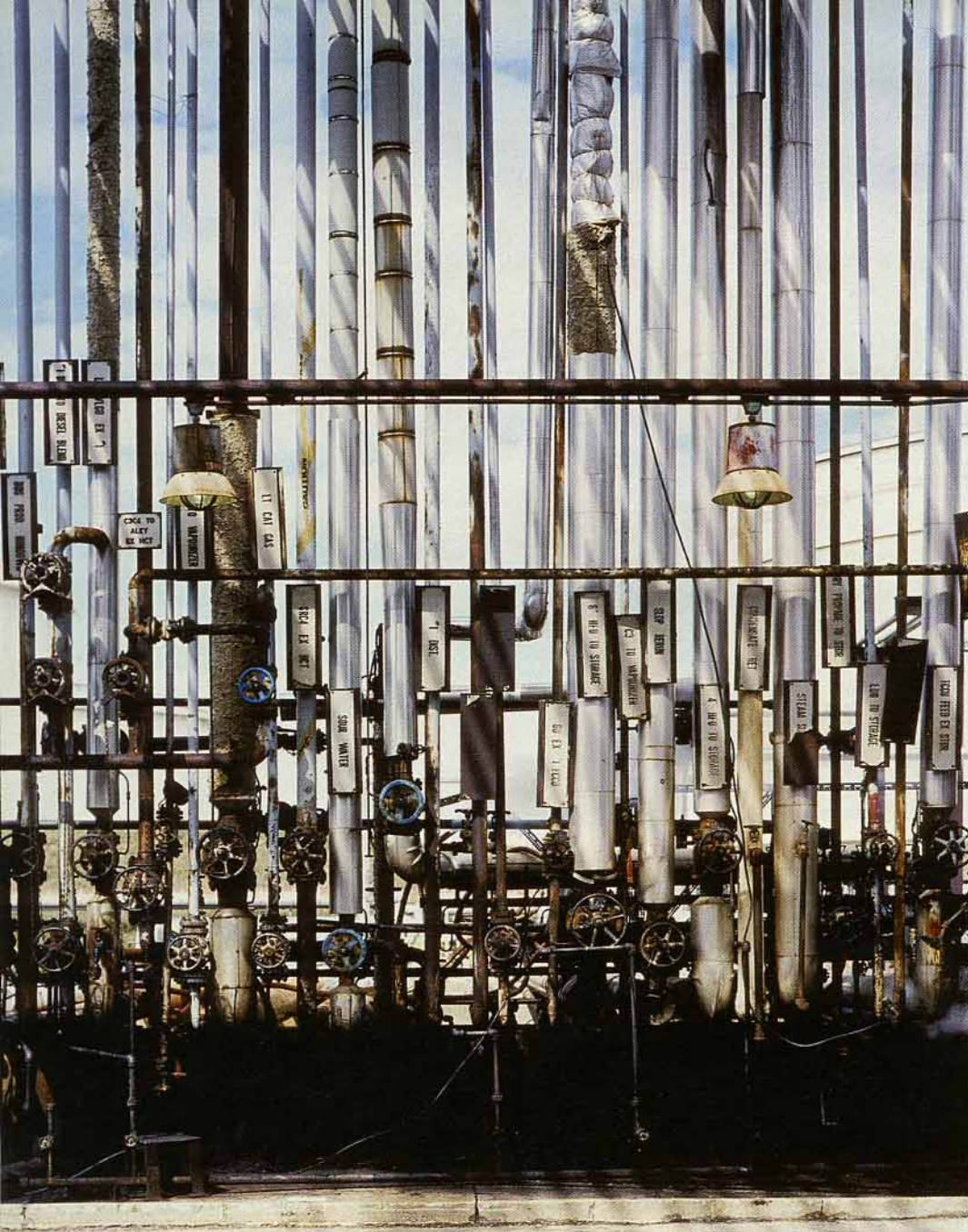
In the story of late-20th-century homosexual life that Evergon wants to tell, it is significant, I think, that he needs at least two alter egos to help him tell

it. Egon Brut and Celluloso Evergonni each have their part of the myth to tell. The exhibition includes Brut's version, an excerpt from *Enchanted Forests of Homo Folk Lore: Truck Stops & Lovers Lanes*, 1995. These are densely composed, cluttered, coded, black and white landscapes; Evergonni's romantic touch is missing. Evergon is, of course, insisting that neither version is trustworthy, that the facts must be taken with a grain of imagination, and that the fantasies must be tempered by the real conditions of real encounters in rough, out-of-the-way places that only desire can colour purple.

Kelly Wood's case of copiousness seems on the surface very different. She presents as an anonymous inhabitant of the city, witnessing and contributing to urbanity's continuous generation of garbage. For five years, she photographed her own bagged garbage, eventually turning to Toronto's curbside deposits. *Yellow Bags*, 2001, a vertical arrangement of 10 paired pictures, represents well the ambivalence of Wood's project. Inspired by the BC photo-conceptualists (N.E. Thing Co., a prime example), Wood nevertheless casts her project in modernist terms of presence, radiance and even beauty. As ART, it is certainly disinterested. Her *Yellow Bags* never make it to the landfill; their destiny just bubbles up in our imagination until we push it back down. And we have to. We have to be ruthless to coexist in a civilized manner, or so the work suggests. And the notion that we exist side by side is an illusion. The true mark of our passage is in layers.

Arnaud Maggs, whose life project has been linked in some way to multiplicity—the human archive and the diversity of human form within—has worked in grids that facilitate comparison, and he also excavated Western culture. In *Répertoire*, 1997, Maggs exposes the cultural strata that we sometimes call the history of photography. Photographing each double-page spread of an address book that Atget used to record the particulars of his photographic sites, Maggs evokes the site specificity and temporal charge of Atget's monumental project; more significantly, Maggs rhapsodizes the spidery trace of Atget, the man. *Répertoire* fuses autobiographical (Atget's and Maggs's) and collective memory. The piece is a highlight of "Confluence," and in a sense, emblematic of





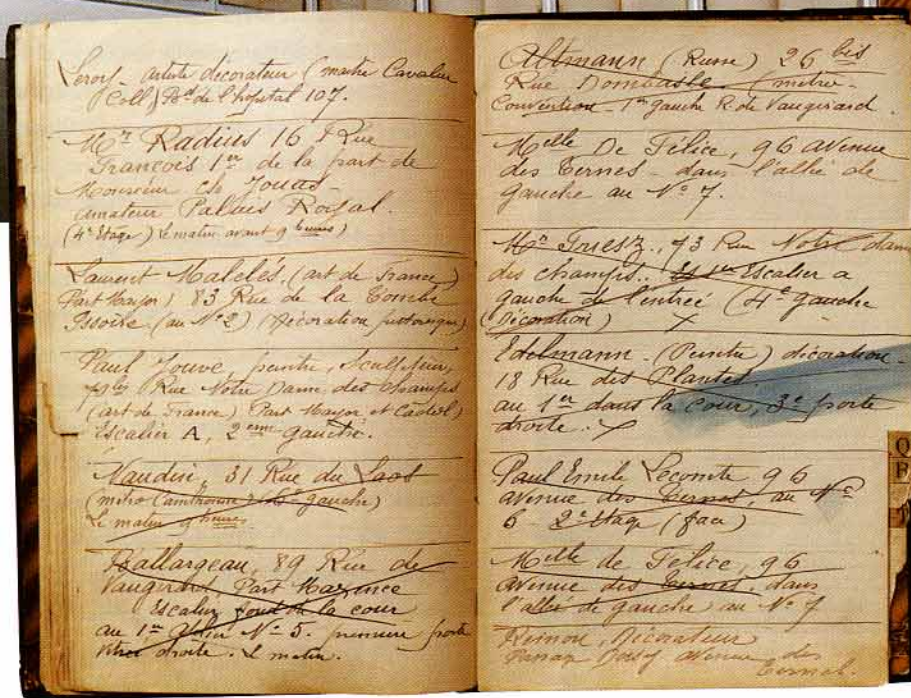
The juxtaposition of city and country, or presentness and pastness, is a literary and visual trope that we have been conditioned to read with ease, just as we have learned to understand photography as transgressive, pulling the private into the public sphere.

Edward Burtynsky, *Oil Refineries #3, Oakville, Ontario*, 1999, Chromogenic print, 157.4 x 132.2 cm. Courtesy Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography.

the show as a whole. There are references to memory, and its struggle with history, throughout. Both in the show and in the catalogue, Maggs's installation stands alongside Angela Grauerholz's photograph, *La bibliothèque*, 1992, which implants a surrogate spectator before a display of knowledge that is both a scrim of desire and a blind alley.

We find a similar struggle, this time between memory and imagination, in the work of Janieta Eyre. Her *Burning Cake*, 1999, is a *tableau vivant* in

which the birthday celebration is contextualized by the muck of everyday life—clothes discarded, used glasses not cleared away—as well as another photographic tableau, *mise en abyme*, as André Gide labelled the image within the image. In Eyre's heraldic crest, we find the artist up to her now famous trick of doubling, and these synthetic twins are going through another rite of passage as the menstrual blood gushes forth and down their legs. Excessive, yes it is, and yet contained by the pictorial device—



the frame within the frame. We get the sense of photography's episodic nature. The main protagonist, whose eyes are aligned with the subordinate figures' reproductive organs, encourages that sense and challenges us with a glare of "what next?" To the degree that Eyre's work heightens our awareness of the stylized mediation of contemporary life, she also demonstrates the thinness of the cultural crust. To enter one of her photographs is to enter an airless time capsule, ready for burial, and equally ready to be

fired as a message in a bottle through the ozone and into outer space.

The given examples should chart what I see as the first task of the spectator, the one I see proposed by the group exhibition, "Confluence." And that is for the spectator to work her way across the surface of the monumental work—the photographic equivalent of the history painting, the machine or the project—until she gets to the edges, to the sign-posted unseen. For some of us, the sign-posting is ideological—we

Arnaud Maggs, *Répertoire*, 1997, 48 Chromogenic prints, each photographed 51 x 61 cm, installation 250 x 720 cm. Courtesy the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.



Donigan Cumming,
Chores, 2000, 12
gelatin silver prints,
soundtracks,
dimensions vary.
Courtesy the artist,
Montreal.

can't look at a Canadian landscape without post-colonial dread. Geoffrey James's Alberta landscapes, *The Lethbridge Series*, accrue to a particular history of place, combining its topographical and architectural landmarks with an imagined West. It takes nothing from James's work; in fact, it enhances our experience of it to situate his photographs of Lethbridge within a tradition of Western progressive documentation—I'm thinking here of the American Carleton Watkins in whose photographs Modernity and the wilderness meet, and the North American suburb is born. James concentrates on the same grey zones.

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we have been conditioned to read with ease, just as we have learned to understand photography as transgressive, pulling the private into the public sphere. Photography has done all this from the beginning, but new protocols are in place. The rules of representation have been tightened. The monumental work whispers that the job of gazing has been passed to us, as mediating spectators. The signs have been posted for a decade. They are rather more visceral than symbolic. The prime example is surely Geneviève Cadieux's *Blues*, 1992, which is a history painting of the body—whose impact grows through gradual recognition, empathy and speculation about body blows.

This brings me to the conditions of photographic reception that I find unusually strong in this show. I've used the word "aura" in a title that refers rather obviously to two complementary essays by Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." What I want to consider from these well-worn pages is somewhat contrarian, for what "Confluence" proves irrefutably is that contemporary photographic works are in fact less and less translatable; that is, they are increasingly dependent on first-hand experience—irreproducible and, strictly speaking, indescribable, though I'm trying to do that here. We have gone far beyond the Modernist breakdown of photography for the page and photography for the wall. This is photography for the space, a space of competition and negotiation. You do not enter the galleries; you commit yourself to them. The experience is dialogical, both internally and externally, and this crucial aspect is brought to the fore by adjacency to other works. The spectator enters the work performatively because there is room for this to occur.

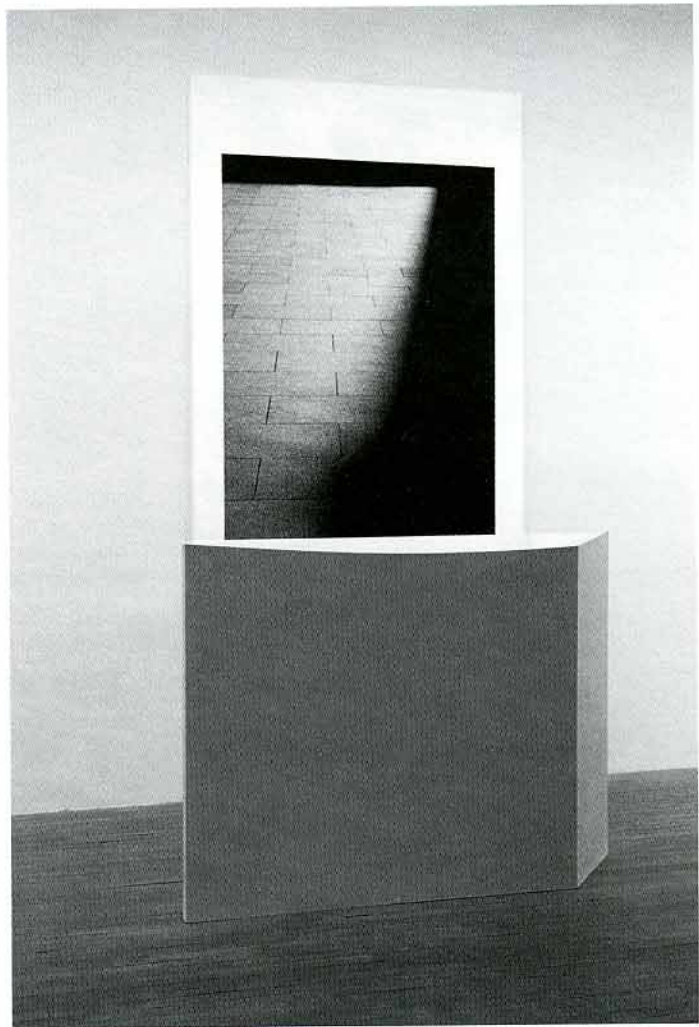
The work of Michael Snow has always contained that condition. *Authorization*, Snow's now famous photographic *mise en abyme* of 1969, is irreproducible because the spectator's reflection is intrinsic to the work. A reproduction of *Authorization* must be carefully combined with textual description or it will be mistaken for a self-portrait, which it is not. Likewise, *Manifestation: Autourisation of 8 Faces*, 1999, in which Snow returned to some of the problems of *Authorization*, notably that of reflection. In addition to a mirror, *Manifestation* involves plastic lamination, an ink-jet photograph, spray paint and black paper. The

representation of the whirling body accounts for only two of the eight faces—the spray-painted laminate accounts for two other faces, and then we have to add in the reflection in the pictured mirror, the paper, the actual mirror and the back of the mirror. We cannot discern these layers except in the presence of the work, and, more importantly, we cannot see them there without bobbing and weaving in front of the piece. *Manifestation* choreographs spectatorial response. It mobilizes the spectator in the gallery space and the rewards are extraordinarily sensual, verging on the ecstatic.

We can contrast that experience with the rigid relationship imposed by Jocelyne Allouche in *Shadows, No. 2*, 2000-01. Here dialectics is didactic: Allouche's combinations of photography and sculpture tend to severity and calcification—they are both pretentious and closed. Conversely, Charles Gagnon's subtle diptychs of landscape photographs and painted panels play off the open and the closed, the two languages of surface. As spectators, we navigate the gaps between these systems; we may try to close them, with varying degrees of success.

Donigan Cumming's *Chorus*, 2000, with its cascade of voices, inhabits the spaces between images and fills it to the brim; then it spills over. You hear the piece before you see it, and you hear it after you have left it. As you strain to separate and make sense of the individual stories, sound enters the body and leaves its impression. That will be your experience if you are alone with *Chorus* in the gallery. If not, the normal process of jostling for position to see will be amplified by an effort to hear—to piece together—the fragmented confidences being exchanged on the phone, and to correlate these human voices with the corporeal details on the wall. And with luck, with the collective experience that only a gallery visit can offer, you may interact with a stranger—you may give voice to the visual.

Is this what I mean by "aura"—the necessity to see the original work in the flesh, or to feel the work crawling across one's flesh? Not quite. The new era of the aura is something more. This aura relates to object-images that strike us with the force of mental images, whether remembered or imagined. The aura tempers the spectatorial gaze; it also frames visualization as the grey border region through which



mental images have passed and into which they dissolve. Phenomenologist Edward Casey calls this particular mental space "radically inchoate," a lovely description of the contact zone strictly maintained between mind and image. Contact is what we can hope for, what a sensitive grouping of images can achieve by leading us into a receptive state. That state is all-engrossing—it is mental spectacle; that is, spectacle for consciousness's sake. Much could be said about why such images interest us now—why we are so consumed by the workings of our own minds. The *confluence* of memory and imagination dominates this photographic era. That is the statement of "Confluence" and its preparation for the reception of quite another exhibition, Burtynsky's "Manufactured Landscapes."

Jocelyne Allouche, *Shadows, No. 2*, 2000-01, colour ink-jet photographs, linden, mahogany veneer and coating (plaster, gesso, pigments). Photograph 218.4 x 127 cm, object 2.2 x 135.9 x 34.9 cm. Courtesy the artist, Montreal.



Whose manufacture is this? First, and foremost, the artist's. Since Burtynsky as a young photographer first saw himself plain on the strip-mined surface of Pennsylvania, he has been seeking out certain kinds of landscapes—the industrial landscape, civilization's grey zone, rendered by Burtynsky in stunning detail, unforgettable colour and at magisterial scale. Burtynsky began his training at a propitious time, coinciding with the emergence of what was then called "New Colour" and "New Topographics." Looking at his imagery, it is strange to recall that colour photography was once regarded as not altogether serious, but, considering the models cited by Lori Pauli and Mark Haworth-Booth in their catalogue essays—black and white photographs and paintings—the historical context is established and a point is made about the photographer's status as an artist. My knowledge of Burtynsky tells me that these viewpoints are correct, but retrospective. The photographer I know was simply bowled over by the potential of the view-camera and the new colour materials to render vast space, sheer rock faces, subtle textures and the small, but determinant, human presence in a single photographic frame. The talent that Burtynsky was discovering to organize these views and match their presentation to his wonder was exciting to him and to everyone around him.

What makes Burtynsky's work so good? The cliché of knowing where to stand finds a purchase here: one gets the sense, whether accurate or not, that he has identified his industrial subject, then pulled back as far as he can to show its spread and its miniaturization of the human actors involved—the engineers of this artificial valley or poisoned river, or mountain of telephones, and the beneficiaries of their work, our consuming selves. Burtynsky has often said that he is simply responding to what he finds, and not mounting a visual campaign. But attending to how he finds what he finds—for example, through the writing of John McPhee—suggests that the equanimity he maintains in the field is not the state of mind that got him there in the first place. To be sure, he is torn between fascination and implication, but these are the traditional stress lines of the sublime, just ratcheted up by the evidentiary aspect of the work. These are manufactured landscapes, not imagined

landscapes. The work of imagination belongs to the spectator as we contemplate the range of our activities here on earth, from a little too much pressure to unpardonable blight.

Burtynsky's "Shipbreaking" series is the climax of the National Gallery show. Organized to wrap the spectator in the iron hulks, framed so that the eye wades into the oily shallows, then putters around on the rust-coloured Bangladesh beach, these images create a hellish space from which there seems no way back. And all the ecological events—those great spills—that are brought before us by angry environmentalists and bereft bird lovers seem almost to pale by comparison, because this is not an event, but a continuous leaching of toxins into the earth and water elsewhere, just beyond the fringe of Western collective awareness. Burtynsky has photographed these scenes in appalling detail, but they are still, as Kenneth Baker suggests, abstractions because never sufficiently explicit, because photography leaves out as much as it puts in: "it accurately mirrors not the way things work, but our thunderstruck incapacity to comprehend the total world system." We should know that by now, and the realization should not leave us helpless. Burtynsky's photographs confirm that industrialized nations and busy people like ourselves have their dirty work done by others. The scale of values imaged by Burtynsky applies everywhere: it is global and local. As he heightens our awareness of what we can see, he prompts us to think about what we dare not. Is this a conceptual project? Yes, in the terms laid down by "Confluence," as sensual works working a community of inquiring minds. ■

"Confluence: Contemporary Canadian Photography" was on exhibit at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography from January 25 to May 4, 2003. "Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky" was shown at the National Gallery of Canada from January 31 to May 4, 2003.

Martha Langford is a writer and curator who lives in Montreal. She wrote this article in memory of photographer and writer Douglas Clark. She is the former director of the CMCP.

facing page, top left: Edward Burtynsky, *Railcuts #8*, C.N. Track, Thompson River, British Columbia, 1985. Dye-coupler print, 69 x 86 cm. Courtesy National Gallery of Canada.

lower left: *Shipbreaking #31*, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2000. Dye-coupler print, 127 x 102 cm. Collection of Vahan and Susan Kololian.

lower right: *Shipbreaking #27*, with Cutter, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2001. Dye-coupler print, 102 x 127 cm. Collection of the artist.