

Im Schmelz* - On Survival in Image Ruins

* (in the glaze/the gloss)

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Landscape exists because there are images that create a visual space, rooted in the Renaissance and flourishing in Romanticism. Man-made climate change, perceivable in the melting of glaciers, is made visible through images. They show the ruin of a nature in which, as a resource-intensive technology, they also participate. As recent research on the context of climate emergency pointed out, we are destined to inhabit environments that are ruins¹. How are we going to survive, in the picture? This discussion proposal on the use of art for emancipation from media-formed spaces of action is the result of a collection of observations and critical considerations that arose in the course of an artistic research project². It is an essayistic processing of research results with a critical art-theoretical orientation. As it is dealing with a subject that cannot be considered from any point of view outside the ongoing process - usually understood as being scientific observer's point of view - the written form aims to convey the experiences gained on site through the text form, all by keeping the associative and experimental method that led these research-process. As Tim Ingold has put "re-search", it is another search, this time through writing, to "itinerate" and "correspond" not only with what has been studied, but also with what might emerge in writing about it.³ Since texts and images are understood as constructive elements of a history of the imagination of the Alpine landscape, the essay, aiming to follow mediations and complicities between constructions and constructs, undertakes a journey in a hill-walker's manner that moves between literary, imaginary, historical and contemporary spaces. The aim is to understand how, in the sense of Warburg's transitory afterlife, concepts resurface and influence perceptions and actions.

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1. Henric Benesch, Karl Palmås, Kalle Sanner, and Anna Åberg. "Re-Presenting Ruins, Visualizing the Toxic Sublime: Cross-Disciplinary Collaborations in Lens-Based Art," conference paper to Swedish Research Council's annual symposium on artistic research, 25.11.2020 - 26.11.2020. <https://research.chalmers.se/en/publication/520983>, 26.4.2024.

2. J. Emil Sennewald, Petra Köhle, Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, *En fonte – Im Schmelz. Sous le regard de la Furka ou l'image en ruines. Unterm Furkablick oder vom Ruin der Bilder*. Institut de recherche en Arts Visuels, EDHEA, 2024.

3. Tim Ingold, "Anthropology Between Art and Science: An Essay on the Meaning of Research," *FIELD - A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, fall 2018, <https://field-journal.com/issue-11/anthropology-between-art-and-science-an-essay-on-the-meaning-of-research/>, 3.5.2025.

"I climbed this whole mountainside, To wash my eyelids in the rain"
Leonard Cohen

Let us start with an image.

This photo taken with a mobile phone shows a small blue flower surrounded by grasses and other green plants. Experts may recognise it as the common mountain gentian. Around it are a few patches of earth, on the bottom of the picture is the tip of a boot. The observation is transformed by the act of putting it in the picture. The experience of space, wind, sounds, surroundings and smells disappear and give way to other associations in the pictorial space of the photograph. To literature, for example.



From Romanticism

The notorious blue flower appears as a dream image in Novalis's novel fragment *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, published posthumously in 1802, as a symbol of romantic longing.⁴ As he falls asleep, Heinrich thinks: "But I long to see the blue flower".⁵ In the dream, he finds himself at the foot of a mountain, enters a cave whose walls are covered with a liquid "that was not hot, but cool, and cast only a dull, bluish light on the walls". From today's perspective, this light is much like that from liquid crystal displays. Blue and short-wave, like UV radiation, it has an influence on the sleep and wake rhythm. For some, it causes insomnia. An anachronistic association that may gain significance later on. Back to Novalis: Invigorated by the liquid, Heinrich swims "after the shining stream", only to find himself "on a soft lawn at the edge of a spring". There, a "tall light-blue flower" attracts him "with full power". He contemplates it "for a long time with unnameable tenderness", wants to approach it, when the flower bends towards

4. Novalis, "Heinrich von Ofterdingen. Ein nachgelassener Roman," *Werke in zwei Bänden*, 1 (Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 1996), pp. 227-412, transl. JES.

5. Op.cit., p. 231

him, he sees "a tender face" in its blossom - just then his mother wakes him from his dream.⁶

Self-empowerment

What we witness in Novalis's novel is the mutual authorisation of nature and man as it has been developed in German romanticism with considerable effects on the political self-awareness of 19th century citizens.⁷ In the novel, Heinrich glimpses an *active* flower in his dream; it comes towards the dreamer. Friedrich von Hardenberg, the civil name of the author Novalis, referred to real flowers, those from the heliotrope family, as a reference to this figure. These are plants that turn their leaves towards the sun. This is not an insignificant detail. Friedrich's, and therefore Heinrich's, blue flower is active, but not of its own initiative. It appears in the dream because Heinrich longs for it. It turns towards him because he wants to approach it. In a further twist, this *involuntary attention* puts the dreamer in a position to 'poeticise' nature, which he has only established as revealing itself to him through his dream. To put this mechanism of poetical self-empowerment in short: in the romantic novel, the turn towards nature is activated by the longing for it, whereby in return the subject can involuntary imagine itself as dominating it. In order to make this mechanism work, it is necessary, that the romantic subject ignores the conditions of the possibility of this domination, which are conditions of text and image, *logos* and *eidos*.⁸

6. Op.cit., p. 232 sq.

7. "In other words, the Romantics were searching for a *nature of authority*. [...] For the Romantics, trees and flowers were much more than material nature – they had authoritative, discernable souls." Van Thi Diep, "The Romantic Landscape: A Search for Material and Immaterial Truths through Scientific and Spiritual Representations of Nature", *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts*, 7-2, 2020, p. 137-168, p. 140, 153. I would rather argue that this authority is a way of empowering the author himself.

8. "And for desire to triumph, the subject must be threatened with dissolution. A subject turned against itself (its desire) appears, on this model, to be a condition of the persistence of the subject. To desire the conditions of one's own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself. [...] The "I" emerges upon the condition that it deny its formation in dependency, the conditions of its own possibility." Judith Butler, *The psychic life of power: theories in subjection*, (Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 9-10.

Subjugation Scenes

Reading Novalis, we see an interplay between two genders, in which the active, heroic man triggers the affection of the flower.⁹ When the contemplating subject, i.e. Heinrich, is endowed with poeticising power in this way, the image and the nature it represents changes its status. This is the point that interests us in this article: the influence of symbolic forms on perception and their after-effects, far beyond the historical context of the actual literary form. With Horst Bredekamp, one could speak of the "embodiment" of a subjective process that is transferred from the fictional space into the experiential space¹⁰. How exactly this happens is to be explored in the following. Through transmedial displacement, the common mountain gentian is associated with the romantic blue flower in the photo shown at the beginning by being emphasised and isolated in the pictorial space. Victor Burgin calls this the "working space of photography"¹¹. It is a media-specific space of meaning that produces its subject in the same movement in which it provides its content. Thus, the photograph of any flower of blue colour provides an additional layer of meaning. From early German Romanticism until today, 'nature' has meant something that is encountered as different, that perhaps appears strange or causes fear, that is in motion and multifaceted, and is then enclosed as part of a narrative, a structured and organised pictorial space.¹²

9. "Shortly before the turn of the 19th century, the figure of the poet and the male gender character differentiate into two poles, the compatibility of which from then on becomes the main task of the self-definition of a male poet subject." Regula Fankhauser, "Das verleugnete Geschlecht der blauen Blume. Frühromantische Aufklärungskritik und das 'combabische' Geschlecht - Zu Novalis' Entwurf eines frühromantischen Dichtersubjekts," *Das Geschlecht der Künste*, ed. Sigrid Weigel, (Boehlau, 1996), p. 50, transl. JES.

10. Horst Bredekamp, *Théorie de l'acte d'image: conférences Adorno, Francfort 2007*, (La Découverte, 2015).

11. „A fact of primary social importance is that the photograph is a *place of work*, a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar with in order to make sense. Photography is one signifying system among others in society which produces the ideological subject in the same movement in which they 'communicate' their ostensible 'contents'." Victor Burgin, „Looking at photographs," *Thinking photography*, (MacMillan Press, 1982), p. 142-153, here p. 153.

12. In the context of photography, 'poetization' could be understood as the creation of a 'visual narrative' based on the tension between the visible and its cultural associations, as pointed out by Marianna Michalowska, "Photography's Narrative Spaces - Stories About Man-Altered Landscape", *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts*, 9-4, 2022, p. 275-290, p. 277.

On the Sublime

This process is rooted in the concept of the sublime. Made influential in the 18th century by the critiques of Immanuel Kant, it delineates a realm beyond beauty as 'pleasure mixed with pain'. Formulated into a political concept by Friedrich Schiller, the sublime became the condition that individualises the subject by making him aware of his power to poeticise: "No man must have to".¹³ This political act of self-assurance, which made sense at the time, subsequently grew into a liberatory concept. Released from the necessity of beauty, the world in all its manifestations became the playground of art - insofar as it had the effect of singularising the individual in its works and distanced him or her from the events - often by using images of fear and amazement. As Susan Sontag pointed out, "one of the things that fantasy can do is to normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it."¹⁴ The sublime became the basis of the world experience of modernity.¹⁵ Barbara Stafford described this experience in 1977 in relation to landscape as "the transfer of authorship from the subjectivity of the artist to the objective manifestations of nature".¹⁶ A transfer that takes place within a frame: the landscape as a construct of and for distinction.¹⁷ As a result, images are decisive structures that establish a framework for the action of the I.¹⁸ In such a way that, although it appears to have no outside, it constantly refers to an extra-medial space: "nature". A spectatorial action that is already framed by the anaesthetic effect of the fantasy conveyed in the face

13. Friedrich Schiller, *Ueber das Erhabene*, Vol. III. *Sammlung kleiner prosaischer Schriften*, (Crusius, 1801), <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/erhaben/erhaben.html>, 25.10.2024, transl. JES

14. Sontag, Susan. "The Imagination of Disaster", *Commentary. The Monthly Magazine of Opinion*, October 1965. <https://www.commentary.org/articles/susan-sontag/the-imagination-of-disaster/>, 4/5/2025.

15. "There is no contemporary thinking about art and its meaning and purpose that does not depend in one way or another on thinking about the sublime, whether it explicitly refers to it or not." Jean-Luc Nancy, "L'offrande sublime", *Du sublime*, ed. Jean-François Courtine, (Belin, 1988), pp. 37-75, here p. 38, transl. JES.

16. Barbara M. Stafford, "Toward Romantic Landscape Perception: Illustrated Travels and the Rise of 'Singularity' as an Aesthetic Category", *Art Quarterly*, n.s. I, 1977, pp. 108-109, quoted in: Rosalind E. Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View", *Art Journal*, winter 1982, pp. 311-319, here p. 315.

17. "The sublime plays a distinguishing role here: being able to take pleasure in contemplating glaciers or arid rocky outcrops enabled English tourists to differentiate themselves from mountain guides and peasants, who saw only danger and wasteland." Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime", *mouvements des idées et des luttes*, September 16, 2016. <https://mouvements.info/sublime-anthropocene/>, 24/4/2025, transl. JES.

18. "This is how photography of new topography works. The photographer's role is to tell stories, to viewers - to act." Marianna Michalowska, "Photography's Narrative Spaces - Stories About Man-Altered Landscape", *op.cit.*, p. 288.

of disaster. In other words, the sublime fantasy is completely dependent on nature's catastrophe in order to function fully. Terry Eagleton saw a correspondence between the concept of the sublime and the birth of industrialised capitalism. By presenting danger and suffering as imagined masculine endeavours, it contained the threat to productivity associated with the concept of beauty, which was seen as passive and feminine.¹⁹

Screened from the Image

"Through the concept of the sublime, images block access to nature," says Julian Charrière. The Swiss artist conducts research-based work on geological formations, translating their specific characteristics into the exhibition space with a neo-Romantic impetus. "In order to escape the sublime," Charrière continues, "in order to find intimacy with the habitat again, you either have to do without images or always reflect on how they function."²⁰ The artist, who is currently doing this quite successfully with installations that are shown in exhibitions worldwide, confirms that the sublime still functions today as a powerful motor for image production, visual pleasure and exhibition art. The effect of the 'sublime' is part of the framing structure. To this day, it acts as a powerful stimulus for desire and image production. As in romantic poeticisation, the individual who gazes at the world takes possession of it with his eyes. The process is related to geometric perspective. Since the Renaissance, it has transformed painting, especially landscape painting, into a calculated and controllable 'window on the world'. A reorganisation fragmented into frames, as can already be seen in Albrecht Altdorfer's "Danube Landscape with Wörth Castle" from around 1520/25. The painting, considered to be the first topographically accurate depiction of a landscape without human figures, frames a view of the castle from an elevated vantage point with a leafy tree and a needle tree, around which land is arranged. The scene looks like a country estate spread out before the viewer. Aside from its mytho-religious dimension, landscape painting had to show what was to be seen there - a reorganisation of the land fragmented into frames - as land property. With the salons being opened up to an ever-growing audience, every spectator of landscape paintings became a potential 'owner'. This had an impact on how this world became accessible as a space for action. While media played an increasingly important role in this process, the industrialisation of photography meant that artists increasingly took a back seat as the main agents of this medial transformation. The artificial-medial nature of the landscape was overlooked in favour of the image paradigm, while at the

19. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 50-53.

20. Conversation with the artist in regard to his installation *Stone Speakers - Les bruits de la terre*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 15 October 2024.

same time the triggered sensation increasingly took precedence over the initiated experience. To summarise: the relationship to nature's image is one of desire, one of appropriation and one that moves its field of reference - the subject's living environment - at a distance, ignoring it as a condition of the subject.



After the Sublime

How can these insights into the effect and afterlife of the sublime contribute today to understanding the role of photography in relation to the perception of the environment as landscape and in particular in relation to the possibilities of action in relation to this environment? In order to pursue this question, it can be helpful to look for cases in which motifs or compositional principles of images are taken up again, sometimes unconsciously, that are considered exemplary of an aesthetic of the sublime. In 2022, French photographer Daniel Beres took this picture of the Rhône Glacier while working on a series of photographs of the most important European sources.²¹ It is not the final work created with the view camera, but a picture documenting the process. Obviously, he played with the motive of the romantic sublime: the composition is reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" (1810). The fact that this picture was taken without the intention of being shown, as an artistic soliloquy, reinforces the impression of the structural potency of the compositional principles of the sublime. As in the painting of the solitary man on the precipice of the mountain landscape, we stand behind the camera, looking past it at the distant landscape that appears as ruins of the geological phenomenon of the glacier, affected by ever faster melting. Beres' picture tells us that a camera now stands where the romantic subject once stood. The apparatus takes the place of the 'Rückenfigur' (back-figure) in the painting. When we stand behind the camera today, it fulfils what the wanderer did around 200 years ago: it becomes a

21. Daniel Beres, process capture on "source Rhône, Glacier du Rhône, Furkapass. Alpes suisses", 2022.

projection figure. The photographic machine has taken the place of the modern subject, projecting its continued imaginings of nature on it. The uninterrupted stream of images now ensures the sublime distance to an ever more disintegrating nature.

Image melting

The transition from a sublime landscape painting to a photograph of a landscape that appears sublime in its framing was a smooth one within a romantic setting. In addition, the chosen motifs, such as the glacier here, represent in their self-referential twist what makes them worth being photographed in the first place: their melting. The fact that we identify the landscape as a ruin is possible in this highly dynamic environment because the glacier has been photographed thousands of times since 1850, when it began to melt. The visible was traced by paradigms of nature aesthetics. A photograph from 1900 shows how it reaches down into the valley. Today it is nothing but bare rock, the ice having retreated far behind the edge of the peak. In the visual space of the photograph this scene, which glaciologists see as the usual process of geological change over thousands of years, become a ruin.²² A ruin-as-vestige that freezes the process itself in a perpetual present - finally preserving it.²³ The point here is not to relativise climate change and its effects on life on earth. It is about understanding how it appears in the image and how this specifically modern appearance categorises it in an aesthetic reference field of distance, which removes it from an urgent transformative action. Frozen in landscape's realm, the modern subject remains a fascinated spectator of his own destruction. The fact that Beres' photography still appears fascinating or even 'sublime' is an effect of the "toxic sublime".²⁴

22. Glaciologists Ralph Lugon and Andreas Bauder have independently confirmed glacier melting and the disappearance of glaciers as part of rather current geological processes which nowadays do accelerate.

23. "If I accept that the equivalents of romantic ruins in our time are vestiges, then the time of ruin-become-vestige is a perpetual present." Victor Burgin, *Le temps de la ruine*, (Institut national d'histoire de l'art, 2023), p. 67, transl. JES.

24. Carolyn Kane, "The Toxic Sublime: Landscape Photography and Data Visualization", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 35-3, 2018, pp. 121-147.

Poisoned Field of View

Adopting James Elkins' position "against the sublime", we can here read a toxicity of the sublime rather than a sublimity of the toxic.²⁵ As long as media, especially images, remain structurally committed to the universalist idea of poeticising the world, the constantly reproduced landscape has a toxic effect in the sense that it cements a passive spectator-position instead of initiating action. Images do not serve survival in capitalist ruins, but rather their continuation. Images of environmental destruction contribute to their extinction, in the sense of romantic 'annihilation', i.e. their dissolution in the total aesthetic work of a poeticised world. Let us think back to the blue liquid that covered the walls of the cave that Novalis' Heinrich entered in his dream and which, after a bath in it, gave him new strength. Under the conditions of digitality, the glaze of the image screens' blue light can be perceived as dissolving the subject. However, this does not liquidate, but is once again solidified as the dominant instance in this milieu. A landscape dissolved into millions of screens - and their image-historical resonances - transform the once sublime individual. It disseminates in wishful images as data.²⁶ One could say that "aesthetic capitalism" is actually a remainder of its own ruin.²⁷ Formulated in material terms, it ruins itself by ever-increasing digital image production, which uses its visual content for 'data mining', i.e. uses its visual stimuli as a driving force for the generation of data streams that consume enormous amounts of energy and resources. "The projections for global electricity demand [...] are 6%, or 2 200 terawatt-hours (TWh), higher in 2035 than in last year's Outlook, driven by light industrial consumption, electric mobility, cooling, and data centres and AI."²⁸ The carbon footprint of billions of digital images sent worldwide cannot be precisely determined; the internet accounted for around 2.8% of global CO₂ emissions in 2023.²⁹ Add to this the desirable effect of such photographs triggering an ever-increasing tourism, which has turned from fascination with the grandeur of nature to awe at the sight of its decline, and one can see that these sublime views are indeed toxic to

25. James Elkins, "Against the Sublime", *Beyond the finite: the sublime in art and science*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), https://www.academia.edu/163451/Against_the_Sublime, 11.11.2024.

26. Felix Stalder, *Kultur Der Digitalität*. (Suhrkamp, 2016), p. 20, turns it as "Hybridisation and solidification of the digital", tr. JES.

27. "Aesthetic economics sets out from the ubiquitous phenomenon of an aestheticising of the real, and takes seriously the fact that this aestheticising is an important factor in advanced capitalist national economies." Gernot Böhme, *Critique of aesthetic capitalism*, trad. E. F. N. Jephcott, (Mimesis International, 2017), p. 10.

28. IEA World Energy Outlook 2024, <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-outlook-2024/executive-summary>, 25.10.2024.

29. <https://de.statista.com/infografik/26873/co2-vergleich-dsl-und-glasfasernetz>, 23.10.2024.

the environment. Once a condition for its poeticisation, and thus aesthetic appropriation, the sublime today poisons the field of vision by participating in the real destruction of nature through its visual representation.

In the Glaze

In the relationship between landscape and nature, it has become clear that media in modernity simultaneously appear as a threat to an outside world, which they constitute as such only as a framed space of action; against this background, every image is already structurally a ruin - a remnant of a former presence that has to be restored as part of every pictorial narrative, which always has to speak of the survival of the images.³⁰ Photography in its industrialised, globalised and digitalised usage as a "poor image" orchestrates this ruin as part of its distribution and reproduction.³¹ The reproducibility of images observed by Walter Benjamin was still able to put them into a commodity flow. Since the Kodak No. 1 ('You press the button we do the rest')³² at the latest, from 1888 onwards, this has driven progress deep into the image space, making its conditions rather invisible. Today we have to deal with what remains. Images are in the glaze - in that shiny surface layer of the screens that seductively liquefies what is presented to the eyes. Susan Sontag pointed out, that "cameras began duplicating the world at that moment, when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is available to record what is disappearing."³³ In the meantime, however, we find ourselves in a reality made up of the ruins of those images that were supposed to record something, even disappearing. Landscape and nature are inseparably

30. "There can be no image that is not about destruction and survival, and this is especially the case in the image of ruin. We might even say that the image of ruin tells us what is true of every image: that it bears witness to the enigmatic relation between death and survival, loss and life, destruction and preservation, mourning and memory. It also tells us, if it can tell us anything at all, that what dies, is lost, and mourned within the image-even as it survives, lives on, and struggles to exist-is the image itself." Eduardo Cadava, "Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins," *October Magazine* 96, Spring 2001, pp. 35-60, here p. 35.

31. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image", *E-Flux Journal*, no.10, november 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>, 23.7.2024.

32. <https://www.kodak.com/en/company/page/george-eastman-history/>, 31.3.2025.

33. Susan Sontag, *On photography*, (Picador, 2010 [1973]), p. 16.

fused with billions of images.³⁴ It is impossible to step out of this configuration of the image with its hoped-for dividend of mastery and controllability.³⁵

In the Pass

But let us go back to the blue flower we started with. At the time it was photographed, on July 1st 2024, it was at an altitude of around 2,340 metres on the Furka Pass, which connects Andermatt in the canton of Uri with Gletsch in the canton of Valais. As Rosalind Krauss wrote, landscape is a discursive part of the medium of photography. With photography, landscape was transformed into a "space of exhibition".³⁶ 33 years ago, a performance took place in this alpine landscape. On 17 August 1991, Dorothee von Windheim invited "a not very numerous" audience to a "long walk". Having "reached her destination", the German artist did not allow the audience to cross "a certain imaginary line". Her assistant played the Andante from Johannes Brahms' Piano Sonata No. 1 in C major, opus 1 on a cassette recorder she had brought with her. Von Windheim crouched down behind a small plant, clasped it with both palms and said: "Here is a blue flower that I wanted to show you." She then put her boots back on and the music stopped. Then: "I'll crush the blue flower with my boot."³⁷ A monstrous act. The female artist smashed the blue flower in front of the audience.

In June 2024, the artist answered the question of how it was back then: "When I did it," said the almost 79-year-old cheerfully on the phone, "there was a long silence, a very embarrassing, actually uncomfortable situation. I really liked it at the time, for me it was a successful performance." With her act, Dorothee von Windheim initially appropriated as an artist what Novalis had developed in the concept of the blue flower. *She* is the protagonist, not the figure of longing awakened through devotion. To do this, she had to invoke the romantic *topos*. Then she destroyed the blue flower - in this case the real plant - but not the symbol. For even when trampled on, it remains, in negation, intact. But that is not decisive in this context. What is more important is that von Windheim has made

34. "The idealization of landscapes since the Romantic Movement has shaped the way we think and behave in landscapes today." Van Thi Diep, "The Romantic Landscape: A Search for Material and Immaterial Truths through Scientific and Spiritual Representations of Nature", op.cit., p. 165.

35. Peter Szendy, *Le Supermarché Du Visible: Essai d'ïconomie*, (Les Éditions de Minuit, 2017), p. 52 summarises this "iconomy" as intangible "infinite sequences of bridging loans or endless chains of guarantee deposits" dissolved in micro-interactions.

36. "Aesthetic discourse as it developed in the nineteenth century organized itself increasingly around what could be called the space of exhibition." Rosalind E. Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View", op.cit. p. 312.

37. Dorothee von Windheim, *Beschreibung einer Performance auf dem Furkapass*, 1991, transl. JES

landscape available in a different way by staging it as a performance. By almost brutally pushing the audience out of their contemplative sublime position, it became possible to experience the structures of imagination that set up their image of nature. The invocation of the blue flower evokes an internalised image associated with emotion. Remarkably, Dorothee von Windheim did not document the performance photographically. When explicitly asked, she referred to a protocol of the action, accompanied by a photo of a blue flower. The artist recognised very precisely that only the physically executed, singular performance can interrupt the romantic magic of the sublime, poeticising subject. Any transfer into more images would have set their interrupted flow in motion again.

Landscape as Exhibition Space

With the increasing use of landscape photography, landscape painting also changed: it "responded with its own corresponding set of depictions. It began to internalize the space of exhibition - the wall - and to represent it."³⁸ Now we raise our eyes from the flower on the ground to the landscape behind it. On one of the works of art remaining in this landscape, we can vaguely recognise some writing. Ian Hamilton Finlay engraved Ferdinand Hodler's signature on this stone in 1987. If you position yourself so that the signature is at the bottom right, the landscape behind it may appear to be a Hodler painting. In a lithograph made by the artist at the time, the art historian Wouter Weijers describes the effect of Finlay's intervention as a framing that allows nature to be seen through art, thereby inviting viewers to meditate on "the borderline between nature and art."³⁹ Finlay's intervention in real space not only recognises that landscape has become an exhibition space. It makes visible how landscape painting has internalised the space of the exhibition - as a part of the appearance of real space. If we can see a painting on the pass, then we can also experience a pass in every painting. An entanglement that makes the confrontation and critical dialogue with the real space - the space that happens to us as remainder - dispensable or even obstructive, embarrassingly disturbing.

38. Rosalind Krauss, op.cit., p. 312.

39. Ian Hamilton Finlay, Wouter Weijers, *A proposal for the Furka Pass, Switzerland*, (Wild Hawthorne Press, 1987), s.p.: "By framing the view and signing the landscape he enables the observer to see nature through art. [...] He challenges the involvement of the beholder who, contemplating signature, view and history, constructs a conception of the interaction of nature and art, a conception resting upon the knowledge of tradition and the application of convention. This experience determines the way in which we will see this Alpine landscape, and in its turn this metamorphosis lures us to fascinating meditations on the borderline between nature and art."

In the Furkablick

Both Finlay's and von Windheim's works were made possible by the 'Furkablick' hotel. In 1983, Zurich gallery owner Marc Hostettler acquired the building, which was constructed in 1897. For almost twenty years, until 1999, the gallery owner offered "the opportunity to confront creative people from the city with an extreme, hard and very interesting landscape."⁴⁰ Outside the comfort zone of the art world, Hostettler wanted to initiate an artistic practice in which landscape becomes a medium. During three short summer months, while the pass was accessible, many artists who would later become famous came to visit: Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Per Kirkeby, Jenny Holzer, Max Bill, Mario Merz, Gretchen Faust, Roman Signer, Rémy Zaugg and many others. In the Hauser & Wirth Gallery's *Ursula* magazine in February 2024, publisher Alexander Scrimgeour speaks of a "Swiss Marfa" with reference to the Texan city, which was transformed into an open-air studio by conceptual artist Donald Judd.⁴¹ According to Dorothee von Windheim, but also others, such as Monica Klingler, Bethan Huws, Christoph Rütimann or Mark Luyten, they could work on site without any particular expectation of results. If there was a result though, in the hotel or in the outdoor space, it was expected by Hostettler to be left behind, presented to a more or less numerous audience at certain moments and then, to quote Weijers again, "left to its fate in splendid isolation"⁴². In 2004, art collector and Ricola heir Alfred Richterich bought the hotel. Over twenty years, curator and publisher Janis Osolin has managed the entire inventory of the hotel on his behalf. Today, the building is closed and up for sale. It now looks like an imposing ruin of highly esteemed contemporary art.

The Furka Zone

In 1992, Mark Luyten stamped words on the window panes of the hotel. The landscape appears behind the words, in a sense it is contaminated by writing. When Mark Luyten saw the work and the hotel after 32 years, he was deeply moved. "It's less nostalgia than a strong memory of a lost time," he told me, "which shouldn't be brought back. I was completely out of my comfort zone

40. "The opportunity to confront creative people from the city with an extreme, hard and very interesting landscape. The point of Furk'art is to let such people work up here for a certain span of time in confrontation with this environment and in connection with other artists." Quoted from Alexander Scrimgeour, "Covered by clouds. A Journey into the Furka Zone", *Ursula*, winter 2023/24-9, 2024, <https://www.hauserwirth.com/ursula/covered-by-clouds-alexander-scrimgeour/>, 5.9.2024.

41. "This interplay of renown and anonymity, knowledge and ignorance, public and private, runs through the history of the project, which has never sought to become a Swiss Marfa." Alexander Scrimgeour, op. cit.

42. Ian Hamilton Finlay, Wouter Weijers, *A proposal for the Furka Pass, Switzerland*, op.cit.

up here back then. Today, however, I'm not interested in reconstructing that, but in my current view of it." Instead of building on the past, it was much more important for him to create a future after the Furka view, finding a "future art".⁴³ The artist was not interested in what was, but what will be and what future we want. If we remember the trampled flower: the performance was not intended to be preserved. There are no photographs to document it. Finlay's work too resists photographic reproduction. Both belong to this landscape, to the 'Furka zone'.

During the summer, the pass is busy: cyclists conquer the summit, botanists conduct research up here, tourists take photos of themselves at the cantonal border, motorbikes and luxury sports cars whizz past the hotel to take pictures of themselves in front of the closed 'Bellevue' hotel, famous from a James Bond film, around three kilometres further on. Instagram is full of such pictures of fast cars outside the hotel, with the magnificent landscape in the background - a manifestation of the aforementioned contribution of photography to destruction. Opposite the 'Bellevue' is the Rhône glacier. Access is blocked by a building where you can buy tickets to visit the 'ice grotto'. This has now shrunk to a pitiful heap, which looks like a romanticised staging of the glacier ruins due to the cloths that are supposed to slow down the melting.

A series of exhibitions entitled "Look how the glacier is disappearing" aims to use the "power of art," according to the official text, "to name and visualise the change".⁴⁴ There are now escape games with the title "Save the Glaciers!"⁴⁵, the Swiss Cover Project Foundation uses the same slogan to solicit donations⁴⁶, in the Italian Aoste Valley, the Forte di Bard there runs the project "L'Adieu des glaciers"⁴⁷, and at the end of 21 January 2025, Unesco and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) proclaimed the "International Year of Glacier Conservation"⁴⁸. All of these projects, and no doubt many more, use sublime landscape photography to convey their message. This is in line with the displacing power of visual narrative, which can be traced back to Hans Belting and phenomenology, and suggests that by mentally visiting places through images we are actually there - and as a consequence we may be able to change those

43. "If art were only past or present art, it would not be art at all. Art is neither a historical deepening of the present nor a re-presentation of the past. Art has [...] an essentially different reference to time. Above all, it is directed towards the radically new, the unique, the forthcoming." Ludger Schwarte, *Notate für eine künftige Kunst*, (Merve, 2016), p. 15, transl. JES.

44. <https://artforglaciers.ch/>, 17.2.2025

45. <https://protect-slr.eu/educational-material>, 17.2.2025

46. <https://coverprojectfoundation.ch>, 17.2.2025

47. <https://www.fortedibard.it/fr/save-the-glacier>, 17.2.2025

48. <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/unesco-and-wmo-launch-international-year-of-glaciers-preservation-2025>, 17.2.2025

places.⁴⁹ However, it remains unclear how exactly the step from passive spectatorship to active hands-on involvement through art can be achieved. Engaging the public's emotions by re-romanticising environmental space as landscape in ever-expanding visual narratives is not the way to do this, it pushes the viewer back into the distant, falsely dominant role of 'nature's subject'.⁵⁰

Of seeing in the Ice⁵¹

Once again, this is not about questioning these and other very important efforts to protect the planet. The destruction is real and the melting glaciers are a drastic symbol of global warming. The point here is to show that a sublime representation does not bring about the desired change in attitude towards nature. It is about asking how such images can be seen and acted upon differently. And to what extent art can participate in such a process of emancipation of the media. The desire for the preservation of the glacier has its roots in a sublime attitude towards the landscape. It is as if it were a matter of saving endangered property. A reaction that is appropriate to a picture, a document of the event, but not to the event itself. We should be sceptical about conservation, for under modern conditions "not destruction but conservation spells ruin".⁵² It is becoming the driving force behind a rapidly advancing process of replacement and its constant acceleration. An ecological imperative for action which is critically aware of its aesthetic foundations cannot blindly succumb to this doctrine of progress. Nor is it a solution to continue to use landscape photography to depict its destruction and at the same time drive it forward.

49. "If we admit that photography has the ability to narrate, we'll also admit that it can be one of the tools that will help to recognize the importance of the environmental change." Marianna Michalowska, "Photography's Narrative Spaces - Stories About Man-Altered Landscape", op.cit., p. 288 sq.

50. Reminiscent of the modernist debate over realism and expressionism, the instrumentalisation of art remains an important issue for further discussion. For recent research on the emotional involvement of the art public, see: Lesley Brook, "Evaluating the Emotional Impact of Environmental Artworks Using Q Methodology", *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts*, 9-3, 2022, p. 211-232.

51. Werner Herzog, *Vom Gehen im Eis [Of Walking In The Ice]: München-Paris 23.11. bis 14.12.1974*, (Hanser, 2022) may be read as an artistic action against annihilation.

52. "Under modern conditions, not destruction but conservation spells ruin because the very durability of conserved objects is the greatest impediment to the turnover process, whose constant gain in speed is the only constancy left wherever it has taken hold." Hannah Arendt, *The human condition*, (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 253.

After Images

Should we iconoclastically conclude from this that we must stop making pictures if we are serious about saving the planet? That direct action instead of visual representation must be the priority? Such a demand would be as impossible as it would be pointless: we cannot have a world without images. Headless action without a visible form misses its object. But how can we survive in the ruins of images, how can we remain active when everything seems magnificently ruined? What can we do? You can't look away, it "feels as though [the] eyelids were peeled away"⁵³ Many artistic positions are currently raising the alarm about the impending catastrophe and its causes, recording traces and reconstructing crimes against the environment.⁵⁴ Others listen to the ice or the rumble of volcanoes to sensitise people to the earth's convulsions.⁵⁵ Still others are dedicated to non-fixing image techniques, focussing on growing, changing or eroding images.⁵⁶ Here lie the seeds of a post-iconic aesthetic that could be cultivated as one of disappearance in the sense of Mark Luyten's commitment to a becoming art. Perhaps it is necessary to divert the gaze, to take in the conditions of visibility, including the pain. The future lies in the fog. Seeing it today is like looking through tears at the vanishing landscape. Seeing *after* images would be based on non-fixing, non-reproducible processes. It would be a seeing in the ice, in the "Schmelzdahin".⁵⁷

Perhaps we need to learn to see, to see what makes the visible possible, to engage less with the representation and more with the representing in order to find a non-proprietary approach to the world we live in. To do this, we have to accept that it is not up for grabs, cannot be captured, cannot be permanently frozen in the image. Artistic practices such as Dorothee von Windheim's make it possible to become aware of the media conditions and their effect of organising

53. Heinrich von Kleist, "Feelings Before Friedrich's Seascape" [Berliner Abendblätter, 13.10.1810], transl. Matthew Spencer, <https://www.paradise-almanac.net/p/feelings-before-friedrichs-seascape>, 14.11.2024.

54. Like Susan Schuppli's investigative videos "Cold Cases": <https://susanschuppli.com/COLD-CASES-1>, 18.2.2025.

55. As Camille Llobet with her movie "Pacheû" 2023 and her ongoing research "Glacière" and "Moraine", https://www.camillellobet.fr/llobet/Camille_Llobet_DossierartistiqueFR2025, 18.2.2025 or Julian Charrière with his installation "Stone Speakers – Les bruits de la terre", Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 17.10.2024-5.1.2025.

56. See Almudena Romero's "Farming Photographs", planting the parcels in such a way that they turn into pixels of an image when viewed from the air: <https://www.almu-denaromero.co.uk>, 18.2.2025 or Richard Pak, who, for the series "L'Île naufragé", 2023, disfigured photographs of an island destroyed by mining with the very chemicals that contributed to it.

57. "Schmelzdahin" [Meltaway] is an experimental film collective working with the materiality of photographic images that was active between 1979 and 1989 and consisted of Jochen Lempert, Jochen Müller and Jürgen Reble.

the space for action. In this sense, both driving and interrupting the media, artistic interventions expose a space, making it available for other actions.

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