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Machines as Gardens: Visual Culture and Post-Steel Sensibilities in the Ruhr District

The visual culture that defined the industrial era Ruhr District has in recent decades given way to a post-steel visual culture that represents a new resolution to the tension between nature and technology through cultivation of what I term landscape value based on an extension of Alois Riegl's work on monuments (Riegl, 1928). From 1989 to 1999, the *International Building Exhibition, Emscher Park (IBA)* became a catalyst for discursive and material changes integral to new images and relations in the Ruhr District. During the decade long tenure of IBA Emscher Park, coal mining and steel production brownfields became important sites for understanding how the post-industrial order materialized in the Ruhr District. Astonishingly, decaying industrial structures were rededicated as architectural and technological masterpieces, and 'weeds' were designated as natural growth worthy of protection.

The IBA years reveal an idea of nature and culture in urban space that is a distinct departure from that of modern industrialization. Since the late 19th century, the Ruhr District had been equated with industry, not "nature." The subordination of all forms of nature to the demands of industrial production had a tremendous impact on the environment – from thick sunlight-filtering smogs to sudden swamps that drowned stands of trees. Emblematic of this relationship to nature is the Emscher River. Once considered picturesque, the meandering river was straightened and canalized to form an open sewer system for the northern Ruhr District. While this was a welcomed improvement in sanitation for humans, the reengineered waterway became too toxic to sustain fish or other forms of wildlife. Incorporating the name of the

Emscher into the title of the building exhibition is indicative of the magnitude of change.

The question then that interests me is: How was it possible to so thoroughly alter the modern industrial relationship between nature and culture in the post-steel Ruhr District? How could their separation be replaced by what I will define as landscape value on some of the most polluted sites with some of the most mundane buildings in the region? The answer is: such a social transformation happened because new forms of visual representation and sensory reevaluations of the tangible landscape took root. By repositioning subjects, enabling middle-class cultural practices and challenging industrial iconic images, alterations to the landscape and attendant alternative ways of viewing and representing it were as much interventions that questioned existing interpretations, as they were the result of reluctantly abandoning the dominance of heavy industrial production.

Landscape culture offers a privileged site from which to observe the intersection of elites and the general public and to understand how both contribute to the invention of new cultural forms. In this case, discursive strategies and material practices drove the innovative process forward. Conflicts between economic and symbolic value were discursively worked out through the politics of the public realm. Material strategies developed through the practices of re-constructing the landscape were also critically important to the whole process. As recent work in art history and science studies has shown, ways of representing, designing and experiencing material culture reveal things about subjects' relations to the world that words alone cannot (Mukerji, 1997; van Alphen, 2005). The Ruhr District as a case study reveals how existing visual and material strategies can be recycled to produce new meanings and practices. Forms of non-discursive thinking like the creation of a system of landmark art, panoramic viewing and collections of colored photographs significantly contributed to a post-steel sensory system in which machines are gardens.

References

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