

## ART AS A GEOGRAPHIC TOOL FOR LANDSCAPE EXPLANATION

Roger Balm  
Rutgers University  
Department of Geography  
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8045

**ABSTRACT:** *Although geography is often proclaimed as a discipline with visuality at its core, the relative disregard of how visual artists respond to landscape suggests otherwise. This paper points out some points of intersection between art imagery and geography and then goes on to discuss applications of those points of intersection in the context of fieldwork in England and Wales where drawings and paintings were made to record the last remains of heavy industry on the landscape. It is argued that full use of art images and art methodologies entails a dual engagement with both objective landscapes of fact and the expressive and subjective landscapes of feeling. This dual engagement is described in the context of industrial landscape as a transition from mimetic picture-making to the construction of visual substitutions that incorporate references to fossil excavation and associated concepts of memory and preservation. To produce fuller explanations of landscape geographers may profitably use two common components of contemporary art imagery: expressive selectivity and visual reconfiguration.*

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”  
Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past*.

### INTRODUCTION

Art is one of the loudest three-letter words in the English language (Elkins, 1999), but despite its resonance there remains much difficulty in establishing inter-disciplinary links between geography and art (Prince, 1984; see also Bunkse, 1990; Daniels, 1985). As Denis Cosgrove (1985) notes, humanistic studies of landscape “point toward the experiential, creative and human aspects of our environmental relations, rather than to the objectified, manipulated and mechanical aspects of those relations.” So stated, the role of art as a point of reference seems clear. Nonetheless, it is only over the past 15 years that geographers have explored, and then only haltingly, the implications of J. K. Wright’s call, back in 1947, for greater derivation of geographic conceptions from art (including literature) to enhance geographic knowledge and enliven its discourse (Wright, 1947). It is often claimed that visuality is central to geography as a discipline (see for example Sui, 2000; Gregory, 1994), but the visuality embraced by geographers is an

impoverished form of representation that takes little account of the rich variety of viewpoint and allusion that has been the staple of visual art imagery.

The main obstacle to broader linkage of the visual arts to geography is the apparent dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity in making statements about the world around us. Attention in this paper focuses upon a particular form of landscape and landuse (that of industry) and signposts a middle path where the emotional frisson of artistic expression and creative statement coexists with mimetic representation. Such a middle path combines the views of those such as Alan MacEachren for whom “the use of concrete visual representations...help define questions, develop hypotheses, and find answers” (MacEachren, 1992, 101) with those more aligned to Donna Harroway’s viewpoint where “...there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds. All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability, but of elaborate specificity and difference” (Harroway, 1992, 190).

## **ART AND GEOGRAPHIC INQUIRY**

Debate continues over whether pictures embody pure visual meaning or whether they are, after Wittgenstein, propositions in the logical sense and thus variants on the spoken and written word (see Elkins, 1999). It is argued here that art images are sites where meaning is constructed in two forms: as imaginative geographies (Schwartz, 1996; Gregory, 1994), and as virtual witnesses of real-world conditions (Shapin, 1984). Both forms of meaning can be, indeed often are, constructed simultaneously and this paper demonstrates how one form of construction is interlinked with the other. Thus, discussion employs both the language of positivism and that of relativism; privileging in turn the objective landscape of fact and then the landscape of mood and feeling. Full engagement with art images requires the extraction of geographic relevance from abstract work of late modernism that is often considered semantically difficult, as well as from representations structured upon Cartesian perspectivalism and that we often find easier of access. Full engagement with art methodology requires expressive response to physical and cultural landscape, invocation of *genius loci*, and a step back from the more neutral stance that geographers are perhaps more comfortable with.

This is an auspicious time for geographers to add art imagery and methodology to the tools they already use for engaging with landscape. Geography's rootedness in cartography, a scriptive rather than visual tradition (Curnow, 1999) is now weakening in line with what Jay describes as a cultural turn towards "denarrativization of the ocular" (Jay, 1993, 51; see also Evans and Hall, 1999). In addition, geographers have argued persuasively in recent years that systematic erasures are part of the warp and weft of the representational fabric of supposedly objective data (Rose, 1993). In pointing out such biases, the universe of objective data is simultaneously destabilized and aligned with the universe of images where multi-scopic approaches to explanation have progressively undercut notions of a monolithic reality through individual reiterations of eye and hand in personal response to place and space. Certain developments within the history of science in the twentieth century, such as the invention of photography, forced artists

into an early involvement with multi-scopic ways of knowing. Consequently, they are generally ahead of geographers in the variety of their responses to landscape. At various times over the past 50 years, however, congruencies between art practices and geography have been notable. For example, Curnow characterizes the emergence of Conceptualism in the mid-1960s and early 1970s with its rapacious appropriation of material and spatial elements, as art's "spatial turn" (Curnow, 1999, 258).

Beneath these periodic convergences, however, lies a more fundamental congruency. Conventional data are made meaningful through ordering and contextualizing. Visual art images embody information through ordering and contextualizing. Thus, art images may be considered forms of data. Pictorial information differs little from other forms of encoded data once we accept that the universe of signs is a single entity and that within a broad semiological universe, signs and signifiers work across disciplinary boundaries (Bryson, 1991). Metonymy, the linking of contiguous details, is frequently the mechanism by which pictorial information is conveyed in art images (Nochlin, 1972). Metonymy works in combination with the repetitive inclusions of motifs and signs. These insistent signifiers are largely what sets painting and drawing apart from photography in terms of making statements about physical and cultural landscape. As Sontag concludes, photographs acknowledge rather than explain (Sontag, 1979). Geographers, being explainers rather than mere acknowledgers, stand to gain much from an art-based approach. The legacy of Romanticism is that art has been endowed with special status as cognitively autonomous (Gandy, 1997) and able to convey information that cannot be coded in any other way (Gombrich, 1982). The case for such exclusivity has not, I believe, yet been made persuasively, which is all to the good because it means that art images and art methodology remain usable by the many rather than the few in explaining the world around us.

## **SUBJECT AND PROJECT**

To indicate points of intersection between visual art imagery and geography I will turn now to a specific piece of ongoing fieldwork in the UK. The

*Traces-of-Industry Project* involves drawing and painting some of the last remains of heavy industry in England and Wales. Over the last 30 years the marks of heavy industry (particularly coal mining) have been aggressively erased from the English and Welsh landscapes, profoundly transforming highly individual cultural landscapes constructed over extended periods of time (Figure 1). The fundamental reasons for that erasure lie in a complex intertwining of economic restructuring and class antagonisms, full discussion of which would divert us from the immediate objectives of this paper. The outward (physical) form of the erasure is an impressive transformation of landscape, and it is on that I will focus.

I used field drawing during the project within the broad traditions of geography, as a form of mapping, and means of ordering evidence regarding terrain and land use. Most of the work was done in economically depressed former mining areas with the cooperation of site owners and managers. Of specific interest were three types of relict features on the landscape coexisting at a range of spatial scales. All three types were fugitive because of the rapid pace of land clearance and redevelopment. In many cases all traces of old works (Figure 1) have been erased and replaced with new enterprises such as light manufacturing and service-sector businesses. First of the three types of features was the infrastructure of industry, including pit-head winding machinery, hoppers, conveyors and lifting gear of various kinds such as that shown in Figure 2, a drawing produced at Tower Colliery in Hirwaun, South Wales.<sup>1</sup> Second were the human-built landforms that were the cumulative result of industrial activity over time, particularly the depositional features created by the dumping of spoil. Many old tips have now been stabilized and reclaimed.<sup>2</sup> Although these spoil heaps are associated primarily with coal mining, spectacular examples have also resulted from the mining of china clay in southwestern England (Figure 3). Third, and finally, were the debris fields left behind from the demolition of old industrial workings. These were patterns of ridges and mounds created by the "choreography" of bulldozers and that often contained eloquent remains such as machine parts, masonry and discarded raw materials. The name I have coined for these debris fields is "demolition berms." One can comb the deposits for interesting objects just as one can the berms on a

beach. In many locations the demolition and leveling of the old surfaces of heavy industry is the most striking element of the scene, not only in mining districts but also in the shipbuilding and ship-repair locations along the rivers Tyne and Tees in northeastern England. Figure 4 is a watercolor sketch of demolition work in progress in Wallsend on the northern bank of the River Tyne, near Newcastle.

## VISUAL SUBSTITUTIONS

Field recording forms a prerequisite for subsequent interpretive treatment of subject material. This interpretive treatment marks a transition from the representation of one mode of landscape to that of another; from the landscape of fact to the landscape of feeling. It also marks a turn towards creative manipulation where the role of the art image's producer becomes decisive. An image, as a signifier, has the potential to project itself across space and time between the two historical horizons of past and present provided the image is sufficiently evocative (Bryson, 1991). The art images reproduced here may fall short in this regard. However, even if they do I am hopeful that the validity of the broader issue, that is to say, the utility of translating the landscape of fact into the landscape of feeling for purposes of deeper geographical explanation will remain intact.

In responding to the three types of relict industrial form described above the visual analogy that I find most compelling and unifying is with fossils and the associated paleontological references to the remains of past life. In this case the remains relate back to the past industrial life of a place. I worked the motifs derived from the relict features to suggest fossil forms, including the rock matrix in which such forms are commonly found. I treated the topographic transformation produced by the dumping of mining waste as a sedimentary addition to the physical landscape and subject to an array of geomorphological process, but incorporating into its composition the memory of human toil. The working up of a deeply textured surface, sometimes incorporating debris found on site, serves as a reference to the embedding of remains and the task of excavation, for example in Figure 5, *Fossil Series: China Clay*, which is an adaptation of the china clay tip illustrated in Figure 3. I produced *Fossil Series:*

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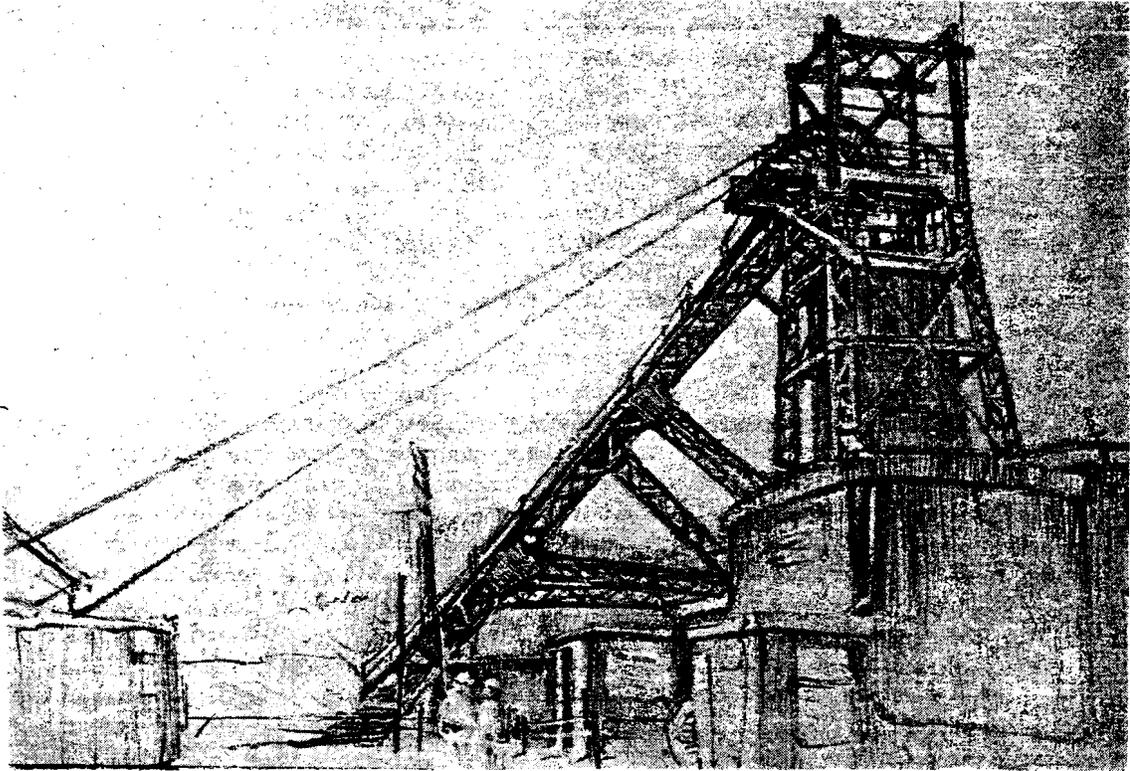
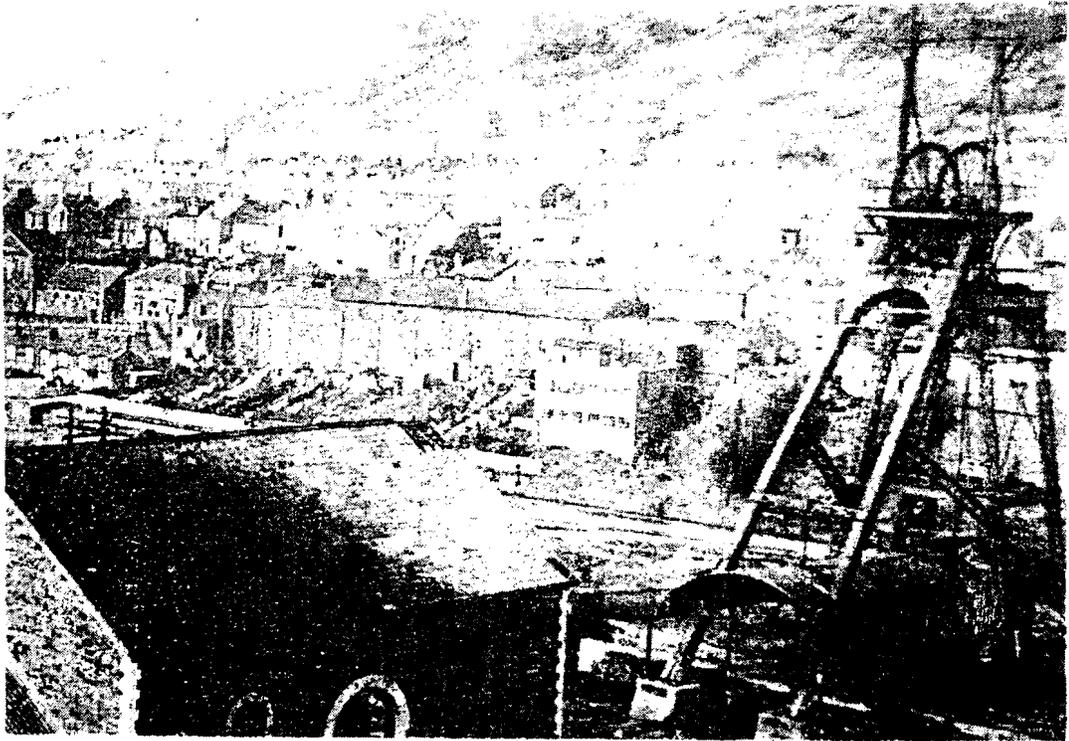


Figure1 (top). The Rhondda Valley, South Wales, circa 1920. Photograph: Rhondda Heritage Park.  
Figure2 (below). Pithead, Tower Colliery, Hirwaun, South Wales. Pencil drawing: Roger Balm.

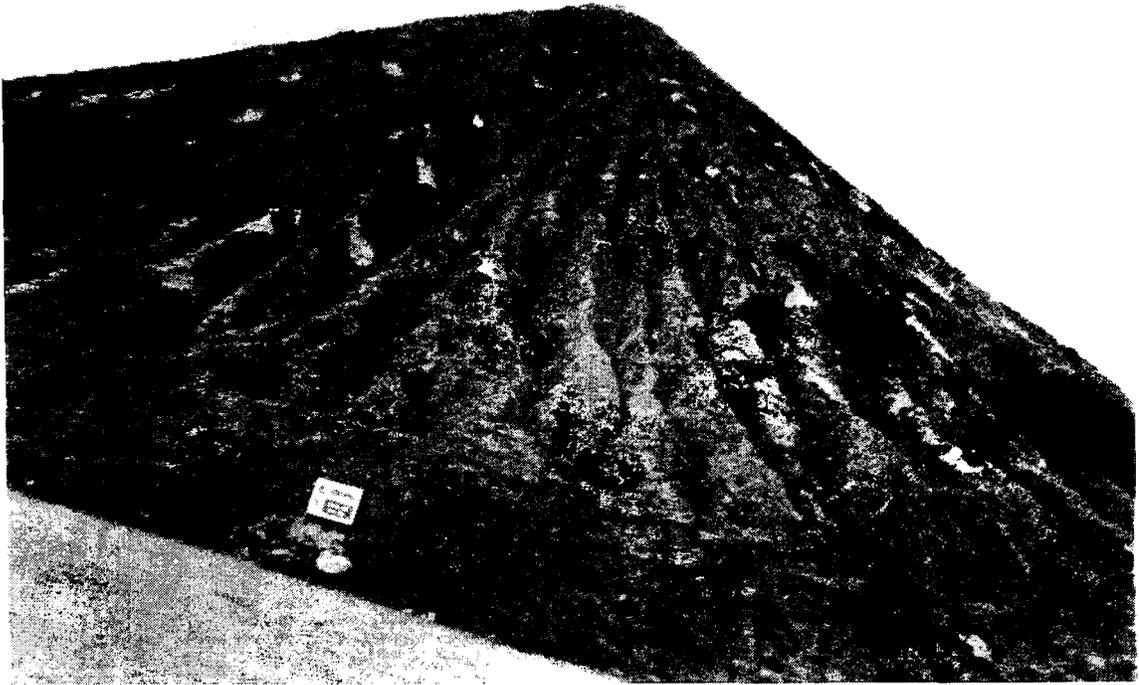


Figure3 (top). China clay waste tip, near St. Austell, England. Photograph: Roger Balm  
Figure4 (below). Dockland demolition, Wallsend, England. Watercolor: Roger Balm.

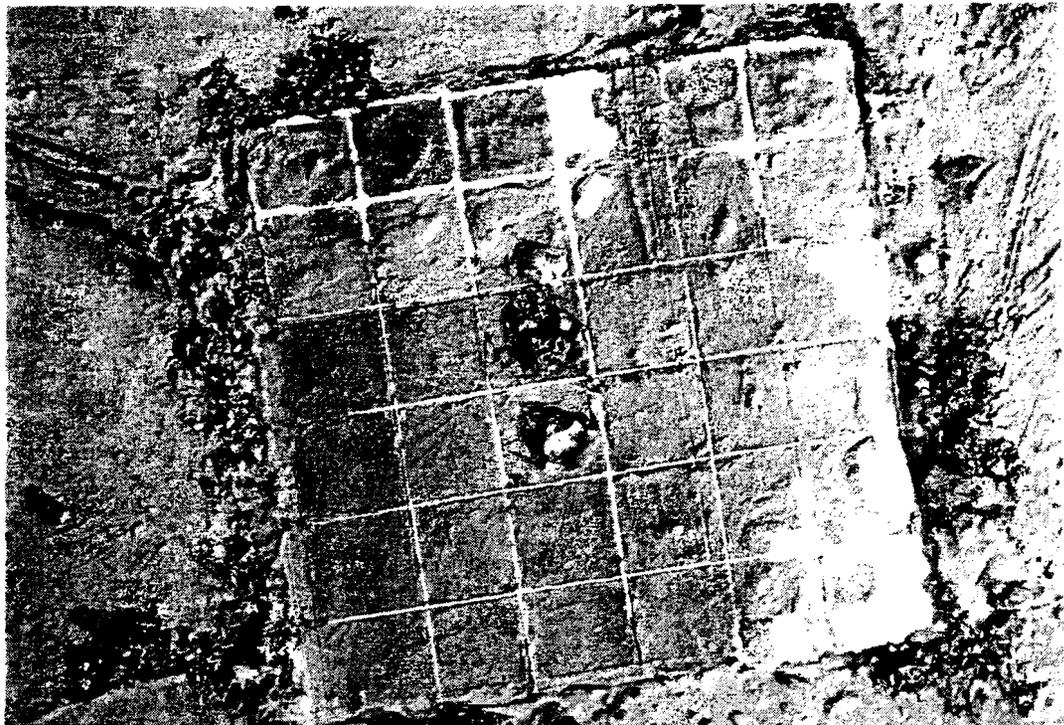


Figure5 (top). 'Fossil Series: China Clay.' Mixed media: Roger Balm.

Figure6 (below). 'Fossil Series: Rhondda Valley Excavation.' Mixed media: Roger Balm.

*China Clay* with a mixture of acrylic paint and china clay spoil. The use of on-site materials is, of course, an act of physical appropriation / incorporation of the site into the image and it enables a sense of place to be literally embedded in the art work as *memento mori*. I used grid symbols in some of the paintings since they are evocative of archaeological and geographical search and survey techniques, mapping coordinates and GIS pixelization. An example is shown in Figure 6, *Fossil Series: Rhondda Valley Excavation*. In this piece the grid and the components of the grid squares carry a reference to the fugitive nature of the industrial remains and the fact that now, because of reclamation and landuse change, one has to search hard to find the remains of the tips that were once ubiquitous. I worked the *Fossil Series* with a dark palette using this tonality as a combined referent to literal subterranean space (such as abandoned mine shafts) and to the spectral inferences that accompany concepts of interment and disinterment. These inferences are implicit in the work since the industrial landscapes of Britain and the associated memories will eventually be gone completely.

## CONCLUSIONS

Faulty theorizing is often resorted to by geographers in order to prevent art images from boring into and weakening carefully carpentered notions about unambiguous data. MacEachren (1992), for example, claims there is a difference between images and graphics in that images are composed of ambiguous marks with no independently defined meaning whereas graphics consist of relatively unambiguous symbols precisely defined by a convention or key. But, as James Elkins (1999) points out, the domain of images is vastly too rich to support such easy conclusions. Paintings and other forms of visual art represent ways of knowing as well as ways of seeing (Daniels, 1985). There are characteristics of artistic expression in this period of late modernism that clearly exploit the potential of multiple visual realities suggesting that distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity are matters of degree rather than type. Review of a small portion of work from the *Traces-of-Industry Project* suggests two practical approaches that could expand the power

of visualization in geographic explanations of landscape. These approaches are interconnected and concern themselves with the process of visual sorting (with expressive selectivity) and visual display (with visual reconfiguration).

### Expressive Selectivity

A process of expressive selectivity deliberately incorporates omissions, erasures, repetitions and bias, those accusations often leveled at supposedly objective data (Rose, 1993). Selectivity extends beyond issues of what is framed and what is not, to include characterization, emotional tone and mood. This extension takes us effectively beyond the realm of the visible and into the realm of notional. So applied, selectivity can inform geographic inquiry in important ways through process of reiteration of key visual elements, the "insistent signifiers" mentioned towards the beginning of this paper. Effective ways of knowing through visuality incorporate a fuzzy logic of cognition. Fuzzy logic may be defined as a theory of approximation that may be usefully applied in contexts of complexity and uncertainty (Yen and Langari, 1999). Forms of fuzzy logic are implicit in much of modernist visual art and are applicable within geography in cases of vague gradation where clear distinctions among classes or qualities are not readily apparent. In such cases subjective individual perceptions must be trusted to assign plausibility and meaning to an image.

### Visual Reconfiguration

Art imagery in late modernism is no longer under the gravitational pull of the canvas (Rush, 1999) and has also broken free from the constraints of Cartesian perspectivalism as the dimension of sight valorized by the dominant world view of the West (Jay, 1988). The fluidity and overlap of viewpoints that one associates with the advent of the modernist turn in visual art finds its parallel in computer-aided design and manufacturing (CAD-CAM) and in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technologies. Indeed, I believe that the visual refractions of Cubism to be the precursor of later

technological breakthroughs in mapping. Analysis of art images as well as the application of art methodologies to geographic projects can help reveal the potential for visual reconfiguration in the treatment of landscape. Visual reconfiguration, informed by expressive selectivity, may carry visual explanations of landscape far beyond the planar utility of current GIS algorithms.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Tower Colliery is still in operation as of October 2000 and is the last deep mine in Wales.
2. Stabilization projects were undertaken at many tip sites in the years following the 1966 Aberfan (South Wales) disaster in which 144 died when a tip of coal slag collapsed.

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