

Patrick Huse



The Steenersen Museum

PENETRATION

PATRICK HUSE

THE STENERSEN MUSEUM ● NORWAY
TRONDHEIM ART MUSEUM ● NORWAY
THE REYKJAVIK ART MUSEUM ● ICELAND

PATRICK HUSE

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and a conversation between
Trond Borgen and Patrick Huse

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The constant reminder of the transient nature of human life undermines all desire to create lasting works. (Mike Davis, Ecology of Fear)

Introduction

Opening an Empty Space

By Patrick Huse

Why should there be a book published in connection with an art project to present its different philosophical and social aspects? In this case the main reason is to provide a source of contemporary information and, in pedagogic terms, to communicate the project as a whole. It is important to provide information on the project as part of the project itself in order both to communicate the artist's intentions clearly and also to focus on the process instead of the art work itself.

1992 was the starting year for collecting material for a project connected to an understanding of a specific area. This developed into a trilogy called Rethinking Landscape and consisting of 1 Nordic Landscapes - 2 RIFT - 3 Penetration. Nordic Landscapes related to a perception of different Nordic tracts of land. Today I recognise Nordic Landscapes as an enclosed space with a romantic and distanced relationship to nature. RIFT focussed on one particular zone in Iceland, in geological terms called a rifting zone, where the landscape is dividing. The RIFT project created a need for a closer relationship to nature and a greater openness to society. Romanticism was not enough and maybe the most interesting issue in modernism is the negation of romanticism. Penetration relates to the geology of a defined area but without any national specification, and relates to the material of which the landscape was made and the role of nature in society. The information required as a basis for executing the project was gathered in many forms: sketches, digital stills, video recordings, written texts including reports of geological investigation, art historical literature on perceptions of landscape and nature, philosophical writings on the same subject; general geological samples; extracts from conversation with curators, art historians and geologists. These are the fragments that make up the bulk of this book. The coordination and the general administration of the trilogy as a whole has been done by an informal working group, in cooperation with different media and museums to energize and encourage the progress of the project, which has been under development for 9 years. The project as a whole has in my experience been a search for information not only in landscape and nature but also in different media connected to the execution of the various artworks themselves. Conceptually, to be able to communicate the content, the idea as it developed had to be specifically cultivated, through paintings, videos, books, drawings, photography and items collected which had to be put in the right context, for the design of the project as a whole.

Penetration constitutes a conclusion to the material assembled in the trilogy. A subtitle to Penetration could be "From Landscape to Nature", a title implying a wider scope than landscape alone. Penetration represents

a quest for a nature that reflects reality, the reality that nature has an identity of its own. In nature everything is linked together, this could also be the case in social systems and we can find structural connections between the systems. Forms of development that may be perfectly sustainable in society can be proven culturally unsustainable in the artist's agency or administration. Cultural integrity is important not only as an end in itself but also as a condition affecting human choice.

All landscape contributes to shaping identity. Landscape carries within itself a "concealed" process linked with biology and geology, a process which generates perpetual movement in nature and can be apprehended as activity. Investigation of patterns and movements leads to an understanding of structures that conceptualise relativity and the impact of nature's variety. A classical perception of landscape gives landscape a secondary role as a stage on which human activity unfolds, partly because nature represented a threat, but in this case now examination of landscape as nature is the primary theme. Our perception of nature depends to a considerable degree on our understanding that - and the extent to which - we identify ourselves with nature. Despite the fact that nature cannot be represented by any particular style and that nature is in contradiction to the violence exerted by style, we know, too, that the various elements of nature are intimately connected. What is of interest in this context is the effect of nature, and the influence it has in practice, in the realm of culture. Rather than perceiving a picture of a landscape as an object to be looked at we should see it as a process shaping social and subjective consciousness. Painting is itself a complex system of cultural, political and economic expansion or even domination that takes on different forms according to the individuals, places and the degree of professionalism involved. The history of landscape painting may be described as a movement from conventional formulae to an investigation of nature, which this trilogy represents. The different art forms are dialectical in the sense that they communicate different aspects of human nature. In the same way all art having to do with the landscape is dialectical, and this is reflected in the fact that we do not classify Central Park as nature, but rather as a cultural landscape, something closer to art, to a picturesque painting or a land art project. The landscape and its geology introduces an openness, a nakedness and a vulnerability which are ecological facts. Patterns and structures in nature establish a language which raises the question of nature's presence in society, and the extent to which we should view the cultivated landscape as an ideal destination or habitat, in a world where life is no longer led in natural conditions but rather in a context determined by the political design of the garden.

Naked, vulnerable nature discloses a problematic side to a manmade environment, and reveals how culture seeks to smooth over differences and diversity, and craves to cultivate until it achieves a landscape which offers less resistance. The historical contrast between culture and nature has a larger relevance than ever, requiring a different approach to the role of nature in society. Nature creates its own environment in accordance to its own rules. Wasteland and barren land are described as empty because there is an absence of human beings. An absence which is the absence of understanding connected to humans' unrecognized relationship to nature. Barren land, or uncultivated nature, is an extreme condition showing that nature operates in contradiction to culture, in the sense that nature is an ever streaming flow of change while culture wants to preserve. Barren land, because of its sensitivity and fragile conditions, shows aspects of human fragility, once humans are included in the natural image of nature. This is not in any way formal, but can be recognized through a systematic rejection of ideological thought (not only in the economic or political sense). Studying the concept of nature is partly a scientific activity in methods and objectives developed in parallel with the use of the countryside as aesthetic resource. The two concerns were interwoven and mutually supportive. Uncultivated nature contains areas and features of special value and relevance to such discoveries. The artist as an anthropologist reactivates himself through a research and the use of different kinds of knowledge to understand nature and acquire a sense of value for a variety of purposes, and nature seems to be a key to action and an approach to the material assembled in nature. If we try to view nature itself, we discover that it is a reflection of ourselves.







Nature as Construction

By Gunnar Sørensen

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Patrick Huse's Penetration project raises many basically simple questions, among them what, precisely, nature is; how the term is used in a variety of contexts; and how it relates to "landscape". Strictly speaking, *natura* means birth, and the Romans used it with regard to all that came into being of itself, as against everything that was the result of human intervention: *natura, non manu*. Thus nature was looked upon as the raw material of reality, or it could stand for that which was extraneous to humankind, beyond the limits of the human spirit and, above all, of what man created. Consequently nature also became the antithesis of civilisation or culture, these meaning basically something cultivated. Nature, then, denoted untreated, unelaborated raw material, and thus represented, too, the opposite of civilisation.

From this follow differing views on the relationship between nature and art. The classical perception was that the role of art was a dual one, in that it partly imitated nature and partly rose above it - to some kind of spiritual height or form of freedom. We recall Immanuel Kant's classical ideal of equilibrium, "We admire art when it shows us nature, and nature when it shows us art." It is not without reason that Kant is also remembered for his rigorous philosophy of ethics, and if we consider the concepts nature and morality, we find that in questions concerning the latter - whether the subject is the legal system or personal conduct - there is a tendency for nature to signify the opposite of morality, and thus something one should preferably overcome. Consequently, an ethic is often seen as something coercive, something suggesting external pressure in the form of commands and interdictions, whether the moral code stems from a god or from a human authority.

If, however, we consider nature alone, we can take as our point of departure the writings of Alfred Biese, "Die Entwicklung des Naturgefühls bei den Griechen und Römern" (1882-4) and "Die Entwicklung des Naturgefühls im Mittelalter und der Neuzeit" (1880), and endorse the view of the Danish professor of philosophy Claus Wilkens. In about 1920 the latter poetically described the experience of nature as "Mankind's feeling for the beauty of landscape and of natural phenomena, and of kinship with the entirety of nature. All poetry contains testimony to this sentiment, (...even though) the romantic feeling for nature as we find it in Rousseau, and the pantheistic feeling for nature, as in Goethe, Byron, Shelley, Lamartine and Hugo, are a relatively modern phenomenon. (...) We place ourselves qualitatively above nature, and yet in many ways our understanding of our kinship with nature has grown; both the differentiation and the unity are more profound. Climate and natural conditions must also influence the depth and freshness of emotions. (...) In addition come considerations of a social kind, such as the growth and development of urban life plus the increasing

refinement of the nervous system, which brings a longing for nature and intensifies interest in it, and the development of the means of transport that permit us to enjoy the beauty of the landscape without having to endure discomfort reaching it. (...) A feeling for the beauty of landscape is, for example, made up of emotional responses to the complete picture of nature, with its light and shade and colour tones, natural forms of symmetry and proportion, colours and colour harmonies, and all the elements which are linked to unspecified impressions, to the entire series of recollections and memories that are grafted in our minds as a result of our symbiosis with nature and all the joys it has provided us. It is this fine web of indeterminate moods in particular which give the feeling the mark of being something fine, unutterable and romantic".

This latter was not least the attitude of the Neo-Romantics, and it permeates the Norwegian novel *The Source*, or the Letter about Fisherman Markus by Gabriel Scott, published in 1918. It is true that for Scott and for the novel's principal character, Markus, God was not present in nature in the way a pantheistically oriented Neo-Romantic would have felt him to be. Yet the novel is infused with the idea that nature is in God! Nature becomes life-giving, in that life and nature become one. It follows, too, that nature is good, and functions as a redeemer, reconciling man with his fate.



Such attitudes seem to stand in contrast to Patrick Huse's project as it has developed over almost a decade, a project attempting to home in on nature as pictorial subject-matter and as bearer of symbolism. His *Nordic Landscapes* of 1994 consisted of views of inhospitable tracts of country, devoid of any trace of human presence, and unlikely to elicit any feelings of familiarity or closeness. *Rift* of 1998 offered the viewer close-range details of natural formations of this kind, while *Penetration*, which is now being shown at the Stenersen Museum, seems to be boring deep into the substance and structure of these details.

Consequently the works are very far removed from what is generally associated with "depictions of landscape", and it may be more correct to consider them as an uncanny transitional stage between being representations of nature and actually themselves being natural forms. In a sense they - rather than making allusion to landscape details - take on the role of fragments of a landscape, and are subject to the processes of construction and destruction which occur in nature. Epithets like "good" or "bad," which one still finds used in relation to the pictorial arts, are thus of limited relevance in the case of these works, and the quality

of Huse's project must be assessed according to criteria other than good or bad in the narrowest sense.

To start with, it can be said that although Huse's paintings are more open than one normally expects of depictions of landscape, they are hardly sufficiently open to function in the manner of conversation pieces, by which I mean objects that lend themselves as points of departure for discourses on this or that subject, depending on the interests and imagination of the viewer. It would be more correct to consider them as two-dimensional objects related to landscape. For just as no landscape or natural object in itself embodies an "attitude" or "significance" - it is we who assign these - so these works do not appear to convey "opinions". They merely exist. But when we perceive them, along with all our other surroundings, we nevertheless do so by comparing, grouping, ordering and comparing, for the simple reason that this is the only method we know.

From Kant to German Romanticism, there was a tendency to see depictions of landscape as expressing insight with close-on religious overtones. The Romantics saw them almost as symbols or revelations of contemplative inner landscapes, while during the 1890s the Neo-Romantic perception of nature could again acquire, as mentioned above, a strongly pantheistic strain. This accounts for the continuation of "inspired" landscapes into this period.

At the time, the Germanic people's close relationship with a nature they believed to be sublime was linked with their generally assumed ecstatic character. And since Gothic was deemed to be a particularly Germanic idiom, a connection was drawn between the cathedrals of these Goths and Nordic forests of conifers. Consequently paintings were produced in which wooded and mountain scenes in fact appear to be temples or churches of nature and of the forest. Both Edvard Munch and German Expressionists touched on this idea.

Nowadays this strikes us as an attitude typical of a bygone age, but our own view of nature is also derived from our attitudes, for instance values based on ecological considerations. And at the same time, when nature is depicted or an attempt is made to interpret it, more is revealed than our personal emotions. In such a context, the essentially mute *Penetration* works can seem highly communicative, not because they interpret nature, that being hardly the case, but because almost the opposite is true: they place themselves at our disposal for many of our culturally determined and subjective reflections.

Since they are exhibited in an art museum, it seems appropriate to draw the parallel with the representative role of pictures and models displayed in a museum of architecture. Buildings - architecture - comprise the

works of art, while the material exhibited in the museum of architecture reproduces, analyses and represents them. Something similar is true of Huse's works, when they are judged in relation to nature itself. They are not nature, but neither are they "only" works of art in the usual sense.

There are also parallels between the way in which Huse's works function and what happens when land art is presented in museums of art. Are we then looking at works of art, records relating to works of art, or merely reflections of a particular mode of relating to nature? And, should it prove to be works of art, do we encounter the same works of art in the museum as those to be found out in nature?

Our preferences and our understanding of the relationship between art and nature depend not only on the time in which we live but also on our geographical location and the cultural sphere to which we belong. A sculptor has told the following story. Some years ago when he was working on a series of simple stone forms with smoothed surfaces, he had a visit from a neighbour. The latter was full of admiration for the works, until he realised that the sculptor had made them, and had not come across them in nature. Suddenly the magic evaporated! In the same way, the standpoint of the viewer determines why an installation of soil on the floor of a New York gallery probably has a different effect on people who spend the major part of their lives in the man-made environment of that metropolis than it would have on the average inhabitant of Oslo, who can practically be said to be used to seeing forest, sea and hills as soon as he looks out of the window. And so one asks: If the city is the most natural source of art, from classical Athens to Renaissance Florence and the great cities of the world today, is art then perhaps "a nature of the city"?



In his works, Piet Mondrian condensed the dynamics of nature to a kind of lowest common multiple. That is why his paintings have a concentrated energy, while at the same time appearing cool and open. Huse, on the other hand, gives concrete form to landscape as a process. Traces of construction and destruction make us experience the pictures as organically perfect but at the same time unapproachable. We know, furthermore, that they are man-made objects. In this respect they appear to be particularly vulnerable, subject as they are to the process of construction and destruction. Yet they also, surprisingly, thereby serve as metaphors for mankind: a part of nature and thus both meaningless and inscrutable, and, for the same reason, open and fragile.

However, it is a long time since Gabriel Scott could say about his novel *The Source*, "...it is as if I had not written other books". A long time also in the sense that nature no longer testifies to a prudently organised creation. We do not perceive it as reflecting something divine, nor as confirming glories that await us in the hereafter. We can, if we like, look on nature as something to be exploited, and consequently as lucrative - acknowledging, though, that the resources are alarmingly limited.

Perhaps this explains why Scott's perception of nature seems almost the antithesis of what is communicated by Patrick Huse in this project. Here there is no redemption, and - to use an overworked phrase - his objects could be said to express that God is dead. Nature in his works is therefore correspondingly cold and impassive. It can, certainly, be understood, and over the years we have devised a rich supply of instruments, techniques and insight to apply to this task. Moreover it functions as a metaphor, since we have developed so many notions and models regarding our relationship with our natural surroundings, mankind seen in relation to the forces of nature, and the opportunities open to gods when they are confronted by the laws of nature.

In Huse's project nature is never perceived as inclusive, life-giving or explained. On the contrary, repudiation, indifference and aridity are conveyed, because the emphasis is on the ordained repetitive processes to which it is subject. In this way nature continues to evoke associations at the same time as it challenges our ability to survive and our intellectual integrity. In a sense Huse's works reflect a nature that functions well, albeit as the result of mechanical laws. If we approach and examine it closely, we may well discover *how* but rarely *why*. And so we will fairly soon begin to wonder how long the laws will be obeyed.

This may be why Huse's depictions of nature are characterised by movement but not by life, or that they seem to lead towards knowledge but not certitude. There may be conditions conducive to the growth of insight but not of wisdom to the same extent. And though there are theories underlying his work - in fact this is revealed in the course of the project - there is rarely the disposition to faith. We can perhaps find support for a kind of idealism, but definitely not for the divine.

Does, then, Huse's project consist of images of a nature that is male but impotent and in which laws are imposed rather than obeyed? If so, where is the female counterpart - that which is life-giving and inclusive? And if landscape as metaphor carries the meaning that we ourselves impart to it, the metaphor in the case of Huse's project becomes the expression both of something completely void and of something

threateningly full. Thus it is possible to find his pictures, aphorisms and installations provocative.



Modernism redefined the limits for what a picture should look like and how we thought a work of art should function. Since then the entire concept of a work of visual art has altered. Thus it is now quite feasible - in fact also reasonable - to discount the picture as the only or even the principal element in Huse's project. Both the epigrammatic notes and the theoreticians' thoughts on his works, on landscape art and on the phenomenon of landscape that he publishes with his pictures prove to be equally important. So perhaps Huse's works are most of all an acknowledgement of the fact that landscape is a culturally determined practice?

Since his works in a sense lack direction, relegating us as they do to areas where orientating oneself seems out of the question, we are reminded that our civilisation deprives us of the opportunity to view clearly our own cultural landscape, and consequently to analyse and evaluate. For we are so inextricably part of the situation we wish to analyse that we are unable to step outside it. And so we are prevented from having a firm standpoint from which we could make evaluations.

But why does Huse give his works, devoid of objects as they are, such an air redolent of Old Masters, and at the same time make use of computer-manipulated CD pictures? And what is the point of including the writings of the theoreticians, of composing aphorisms, and of employing sound effects and a variety of other production tricks? His purpose seems to be, quite simply, to present his material to us so that we should see the vacillating, empty landscape.

Perhaps he does so because he sees no way of reaching us along a shorter, less complicated or laborious route. If that is so, he has to make it that complicated, in order to show us the obvious.

(Translated by Joan Fuglesang)



The values of nature are perhaps the key to the metaphysical synthesis of existence.
(Alfred North Whitehead, Concept of Nature)



