

Mishka Henner's *Feedlots*: A New Perspective on the Ecocritical "Landscape"

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Abstract

Although industrial animal agriculture is one of the main causal factors in many of the current environmental crises, including climate change, it has provoked little interest in either the art world or ecocritical scholarship. One notable exception is *Feedlots* (2012-13) by post-photography photographer, Mishka Henner. His seven high-resolution images were made by stitching together hundreds of high-resolution screenshots from Google Earth into never before seen images that have drawn considerable attention from audiences in various contexts. Using the "Google gaze," Henner reveals some stark realities of life on the feedlot as well as the scale of the environmental devastation brought about by the global agribusiness.

Keywords: photography, landscape photography, Google Earth, feedlots, Anthropocene, industrialized animal agriculture, environment, eco art, ecocriticism, climate change

Introduction

With the rising concern about climate change, museums and galleries have been presenting art exhibitions responding to the Anthropocene. The "Anthropocene" is the name for a new geological epoch defined by human impact and characterized by disrupted climatic patterns, rising water, species loss, and rapid

population growth as well as new technologies. Two recent exhibitions featured "Anthropocene" in their titles. The first, called simply, *Anthropocene*, was the 2018 collaborative exhibition of works by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, presented by the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada. Floor to ceiling photography, film, and virtual and augmented reality images bear witness to how the Earth has been irrevocably transformed by human

actions and leave no doubt that the Anthropocene is real.¹

The second exhibition employing the term is *The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene*, presented at the Harn Museum of Art, Florida in 2018-2019, showing the works of forty-five international artists, including both Edward Burtynsky and Mishka Henner. Its curator, Kerry Oliver-Smith, has taken a more diverse ecological approach, “crossing genres, disciplines, and species” in what she describes “as a response to an era of rapid, radical, and irrevocable ecological change [characterized by] imminent extinction, runaway climate change, and the depletion of biodiversity and resources.”² Oliver-Smith links the Anthropocene to imperial and predatory practices of both colonialism and capitalism which have resulted in endless growth, consumption and waste. Consumption of industrialized animal-based food is one of two leading causes of climate change. Furthermore, she states that industrialized animal agriculture “harms the Earth and transforms the human/animal connection to a consumer/commodity relationship.”³

Much of the art shown in these Anthropocene-themed exhibitions contemplates or memorializes what is being lost—for example, the melting of glaciers, the human experience of rising sea levels or the accumulation of masses of plastics and other garbage. Other art articulates causality or restorative actions either inside or outside the gallery space.⁴ While extraction and burning of oil, gas and coal are acknowledged as a major contributor of climate change, one of the

more evident anthropogenic agents—industrialized animal agriculture, a significant source of greenhouse gases, pollution and socio-environmental harms—has largely been ignored in these exhibitions and in the discourses of eco art and ecocritical art history.

Despite this tendency, Mishka Henner’s *Feedlots Series* (2012-13), seven high-resolution digital images of feedlots in Texas, made by stitching together hundreds of high-resolution screenshots from Google Earth, has received significant attention. Influenced by the appropriative practices of the Pictures Generation and the provocations of conceptual art, much of Henner’s photographic work involves the meticulous construction of images and research from online sources.⁵ Reminiscent of Edward Burtynsky’s aerial photographs of damaged landscapes, Henner’s *Feedlots* reify the scope and scale of the devastation brought by industrialized animal agriculture through their indexical and cartographic nature.

Given the significant impact of industrialized animal agriculture on the global ecosystem and the popularity of Henner’s works, it begs the question why more attention is not being paid to industrialized animal agriculture in eco art. Using Mishka Henner’s *Feedlots Series* as a case study, this paper considers the complicated relationships between eco art, ecocriticism, the already problematized landscape genre, domestic farm animals and the terrain of industrialized animal agriculture.

¹ Sophie Hackett, Andrea Kunard and Urs Stahel, eds., *Anthropocene: Burtynsky, Baichwal, De Pencier* (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions and Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018), 10.

² Kerry Oliver-Smith, ed., *The World to Come, Art in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Gainesville, FL: Harn Museum of Art, 2018), 1-2.

³ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

⁴ Linda Weintraub, *To Life: Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 19-20.

⁵ Salina Oakes, “In Search of New Materials: Making Art with the Internet - Photographs by Mishka Henner,” *Lens Culture*, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/mishka-henner-in-search-of-new-materials-making-art-with-the-internet>.

Eco Art, Ecocriticism and the Problematized Landscape

“Eco-Art” was first used in 1989 by Felix Guattari to describe the new practice of revealing environmental concerns of the planet to society, drawing on the root of eco from *Oikos*, in Greek meaning “house, domestic property, habitat, natural milieu.”⁶ According to Mark Cheetham in *Landscape to Eco Art*, eco art has become a way of structuring a wide variety of contemporary art practices that engage the conundrum of what individuals can do in responding to ecological and environmental issues in the Anthropocene.⁷

Ecocriticism is an umbrella term for a range of critical approaches that explore the representation of the relationship between the human and the non-human, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity’s destructive impact on the biosphere.⁸ Suzaan Boettger is direct in her criticism of the limited ecocritical analysis of visual art to date, when compared with literary ecocriticism. She suggests some reasons to be the problematized relationship with landscape, the expectation for autonomy of art, and the dominance of the art market in the production and exhibition of artwork.⁹

Landscape is widely understood to be constructed from the perspective of those in power. Peter Hodgins and Peter Thompson describe two “gazes” — the extractive and the romantic gazes

through which Canadian modernity viewed nature. The “extractive gaze” relates to the land and nature as resources for the taking and employs imagery such as exploration, surveying, mining, settling and harvesting, whereas the “romantic gaze” is about a poetic response to nature that disavows the exploitation and destruction of the extractive and endeavors of nation and wealth building.¹⁰ While increasingly contested by environmental, indigenous and post-colonial consciousness, it is clear that artists and art historians have been complicit in perpetrating these anthropomorphizing and instrumentalizing gazes. It would not be until the 1960s that the long-standing representations of idealized nature embedded in the history of art would be reenvisioned as the site of politicized social constructions reflecting imperial and colonial values.¹¹

The Romantic landscape arose out of the upheavals of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, representing the beauty of nature in the picturesque and its awesome forces in the sublime. The enduring pastoral, with its idealized depiction of country life, became a source of comfort and solace, a reminder of the dominion of mankind over nature.¹² By the nineteenth century, landscape painting reached a “golden age” in Europe and North America, depicting nature through the reflections of European imperialism and colonialism. Landscapes were envisioned as wild open spaces, free of inhabitants, and ready for

⁶ Felix Guattari, *Three Ecologies*, 53, 91 n. 5. Quoted in Note 2, Chapter 1. Cited in Mark A. Cheetham, *Landscape to Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60s* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 209.

⁷ Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art*, 1.

⁸ P. Marland, “Ecocriticism,” *Literature Compass* 10, no. 11 (November 2013): 846.

⁹ Suzaan Boettger, “Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art,” in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 664.

¹⁰ Peter Hodgins and Peter Thompson, “Taking the Romance out of Extraction: Contemporary Canadian Artists and the Subversion of the Romantic/Extractive Gaze,” *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 4 (2011): 394-95.

¹¹ Boettger, “Within and Beyond the Art World,” 669.

¹² Lauren Rabb, “19th Century Landscape – The Pastoral, the Picturesque and the Sublime,” University of Arizona Museum of Art & Archive of Visual Arts, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://artmuseum.arizona.edu/events/event/19th-century-landscape-the-pastoral-the-picturesque-and-the-sublime>.

colonization and exploitation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, idealized landscapes depicting the sumptuous and breathtaking beauty of the North American “wilderness,” were put to use in the service of a number of colonial, capitalist and conservationist political agendas.

Romanticized images of the Yosemite Valley became the definitive representation of the idea of wilderness in the American west. Shortly after removing Indigenous peoples to reservations, Yosemite was orchestrated as “the poster landscape” for wilderness protection against the pressures from mining and ranchers.¹³ Adopting the scenic conventions of the picturesque landscape and the sublime effects of scale, Albert Bierstadt produced a series of dramatic landscape paintings that made Yosemite the “national icon of wilderness America.”¹⁴ The idealized grandeur of the American landscape may be seen, for example, in Bierstadt’s *Cho-looke, the Yosemite Fall*.¹⁵ The painting depicts his 1863 excursion to visit the valley of Yosemite, accompanied by a group of fellow artists. The image conveys the spectacular scale and majesty of Yosemite Falls with the artists and their painting equipment dwarfed in the foreground.

The idealization of the wilderness remained in vogue in photography well into the twentieth century, most notably in the work of Ansel Adams. A lifelong advocate for environmental conservation, Adams helped sustain the importance of the Yosemite and the idea of wilderness through his iconic black and white photographs. His *Yosemite Valley* (c. 1935) presents a panoramic view of the valley amid rugged mountains and a cloud-scudded sky.¹⁶ With its central perspectival view and the absence of any signs of civilization, it renders an air of the romantic sublime that epitomises the purity, epic scale, sculptural nature and eerie stillness of the landscape.¹⁷

By the 1970s photographers began to “reappropriate” nature and represent it as inhabited.¹⁸ Lewis Baltz’s *East Wall, Western Carpet Mills, 1231 Warner, Tustin* (1974) is part of his *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* portfolio, which documents the progress of a huge development project being built on ground polluted from silver mining.¹⁹ The image is poignant in that it visualizes the encroachment of the urban periphery into the prairie landscape. Baltz’s work and that of other New Topographics photographers sharing the same banal black and white aesthetic, is antithetic to the romantic gaze. According to Urs Stahel, Baltz’s

¹³ Denis Cosgrove, “Images and Imagination in 20th-Century Environmentalism: From the Sierras to the Poles,” *Environment and Planning* 40, no. 8 (August 2008), 1865.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), *Cho-looke, the Yosemite Fall*, 1864, Oil on canvas, 87 x 68.9 cm (34-1/4 x 27-1/8 in.), Timken Museum of Art, <http://www.timkenmuseum.org/collection/cho-looke-the-yosemite-fall/>.

¹⁶ See Ansel Adams, *Yosemite Valley*, ca. 1935, Gelatin silver print, 6 7/10 x 9 in/17.1 x 22.9 cm, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ansel-adams-yosemite-valley-1>.

¹⁷ Urs Stahel, “Adams, Adams, Baltz, Burtynsky: The Role of Landscape in North American Photography,” in *Anthropocene: Burtynsky, Baichwal, De Pencier*, eds. Sophie Hackett, Andrea Kunard and Urs Stahel (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions and Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018), 209.

¹⁸ Ibid., 213.

¹⁹ See Lewis Baltz (1945-2014), *East Wall, Western Carpet Mills, 1231 Warner, Tustin*, 1974, from the portfolio *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California*, Silver print, 6 1/16 x 9 1/16 in. (15.4 x 23.02 cm), SFMOMA, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/80.472.17>.

work not only transformed how landscapes were depicted, but how romanticized images were perceived going forward.²⁰

More recently, the ongoing high-tech revolution is altering any possible demarcation between nature and society. Infiltration of economic activities – mining and resource extraction, agriculture and food production, industry, defence, mega-cities, and the visible and invisible technological infrastructure – are altering the global ecosystem. One of Henner’s feedlot images (a detail of *Wrangler Feedyard, Tulia, Texas*) appears on the cover of the April 2015 *Artforum*.²¹ In the related article, “The Smart Landscape,” Rem Koolhaas observes that while “smart” technologies are increasingly embedded into the architectures of our built environment, it is even more so in the countryside, which he claims is “far smarter than the most advanced urban realm.” He continues:

Every square meter of every field has been converted into units of data and fed into computers aboard smart tractors, which precisely manage seed and pesticide delivery, analyzing optimum climatic moments for distribution to maximize efficiencies. As feedlots for farm animals come to resemble the most rigid city grids, server farms are hidden in remote forests.²²

Relating factory farms and computer server farms is what artist John Gerrard does in *Sow Farm (near Libby, Oklahoma) 2009* and *Farm*

(Pryor Creek, Oklahoma) 2015.²³ *Sow Farm* depicts an actual working agricultural complex that resembles a military or correctional facility. Each corrugated iron shed houses a large but invisible number of sows engaged in mass farrowing. Behind the sheds are large effluent lakes.²⁴ The work itself is a video simulation of a camera moving in a neutral slow pan around the facility at a steady pace. Gerrard took thousands of photos in order to generate the 3D model using gaming software. The suppression of detail in the video simulation gives a sense of neutrality—this is part of the infrastructure that magically puts food in the stores.²⁵ Viewers get the sense that something is wrong in this post-human pastoral. Although this is a real factory farm one never sees animals or humans, a bit akin to the romanticized and vacant colonial landscapes.

Unlike the sow farm which lacks security and human presence, Gerrard had to hire a helicopter in order to take photographs of the Google server farm, which he used in developing a similar video simulation. The work makes the materiality of the ephemeral internet more real – with all its security, cooling, storage, processing and transmission infrastructure.²⁶ Both the sow farm and the server farm remain out of sight of the consumer, inconspicuous in the countryside.

Greg Garrard, in his book *Ecocriticism*, describes how industrialization has caused animals to be removed from everyday life in order to conceal the meat production processes from public scrutiny. He concludes that “since much livestock

²⁰ Stahel, “Adams, Adam, Baltz, Burtynsky,” 212.

²¹ See *Artforum* Archive, <https://www.artforum.com/print/archive/53/50724>.

²² Rem Koolhaas, “The Smart Landscape,” *Art forum International* 53, no. 8 (April 2015), 215-16.

²³ See John Gerrard, *Farm (near Libby, Oklahoma) 2009*, <http://www.johngerrard.net/sow-farm.html> and *Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma) 2015*, <http://www.johngerrard.net/farm-pryor-creek-oklahoma-2015.html>.

²⁴ John Gerrard, *Sow Farm*. See also “Video Can No Longer Be Considered Experimental,” filmed in 2015 by Tate Shots, accessed April 29, 2020, <http://www.johngerrard.net/sow-farm.html>. on same site.

²⁵ Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art*, 100-102.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

farming is objectionable on both environmental and welfare grounds, liberationist cultural studies may be seen as an important ally of ecocriticism if not strictly a branch of it.”²⁷ So while ecocriticism acknowledges “a sustained and sustaining interest in the subjectivity of the non-human, and in the problem of the troubled boundaries between the human and other creatures,” it fails to broadly acknowledge a relationship with domestic animals, believing its purview rests with wild animals in the wilderness.²⁸ While venerating wild animals they tend to treat domestic animals as “destructive accomplices of human culture.”²⁹

Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer, in “Animals Are Not Believers in Ecology,” state that while environmentalists and animal advocates share certain concerns about the relationships of humans and the non-human world, they are informed by fundamentally different political and ethical beliefs which affect the perspectives they take.³⁰ Applied to visual art: environmental art would tend to take a “big picture” perspective whereas animal advocacy art would focus on the consequences of human-animal interactions, delving beneath the veneer of the “big picture” to reveal difficult truths.³¹

To illustrate Daniel Beltrá’s *Cattle Ranch in Agua Boa, Mato Grosso, Brazil. August 8, 2008* provides an aerial view of a Brazilian feedlot in his series on the Amazon.³² At the ground level is Isabelle La Rocca González’s *Censored Landscapes* series of large-scale photographic images that include sites of animal agriculture, including livestock auctions, slaughterhouses, meat processing centers, egg farms, “broiler” chicken farms, turkey farms, rabbit farms, goat farms, squab farms, duck farms, dairy farms, feedlots, and fish farms.³³ While some of the works show animals up close, many are views of isolated facilities resembling Gerrard’s digitally constructed landscapes. Rather than specifying locations of these facilities, she represents the animals that have been made invisible in numbers in bold black.³⁴ González expresses concern about the suppression of knowledge of the environmental destruction, animal cruelty, negative health effects and worker exploitation rampant in the industry. Especially concerning are the “Ag-Gag” laws that have criminalized photographing agricultural sites under the U.S. federal Animal Terrorism Act.³⁵

²⁷ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2011), 140, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁰ Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer, “Animals are Not Believers in Ecology: Mapping Critical Differences between Environmental and Animal Advocacy Literatures,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 14, no. 2 (2007), 123-24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 123-24.

³² See Daniel Beltrá, *Cattle Ranch in Agua Boa, Mato Grosso, Brazil, August 8, 2008*, <https://danielbeltra.photoshelter.com/image/I0000lpWCqvKsZ2w>.

³³ See images of Isabelle La Rocca González, 2014, from her *Censored Landscapes* Series, <https://www.censoredlandscapes.org>.

³⁴ Isabel La Rocca González, “Censored Landscapes,” <http://www.gliissi.org/censored-landscapes>.

³⁵ According to Pamela Fiber-Ostrow and Jarret S. Lovell, in “Behind a veil of secrecy: animal abuse, factory farms, and Ag-Gag legislation,” in *Contemporary Justice Review* 19, 2 (2016): 230-249, the so-called “Ag-Gag” laws that emerged in the United States are in response to pressure from the agriculture industry to criminalize photography at factory farms. The emergence of legislation that targets animal rights advocates and artists like González not only raises concerns about freedom of speech but also law-makers’ commitment to protecting farm animals and workers from abuse.

Mishka Henner is one of a number of artists using Google and similar apps as ways of critiquing the legitimacy of the dominance of corporations and invasive technologies in our lives. At the same time these tools are providing access to information about environmental changes on Earth that would otherwise be inaccessible. When asked about the legal risks of using Google Earth to retrieve images of feedlots and other sensitive sites, Henner replied, “we are in a unique time... It is important to do this work of re-appropriation now, without banning anything, because the legal situation is unclear.”³⁶

While Henner’s *Feedlots* series is evidently looking at the “big picture,” it also reveals the bare lives of the animals trapped in today’s industrialized food production systems. By taking a different perspective on landscape and the farm animals, Henner’s *Feedlots* span the divide between environmentalists and farm animal advocates.

Despite its clear relevance, the inclusion of industrial animal agriculture in eco art remains tentative. Mark Cheetham in his 2018 book describes how the representation of landscape mirrors societal beliefs and values towards environmental, aesthetic, social and political relationships between human and non-human animals and the world they inhabit.³⁷ While being cognate with the long revered landscape genre and land art of the 1960s and 70s, there is no ontological answer to what is and is not eco art

beyond what is pragmatic and conventional, subject to use and subject to change.³⁸

Case Study – Post-Photography Photographer, Mishka Henner’s *Feedlots* Series

Born in 1976 in Brussels, Belgium, Mishka Henner moved to the UK in 1984, where he studied sociology and obtained a Master of Arts degree at Goldsmiths College in London. In 2002 Henner became interested in the power of the documentary but became increasingly frustrated with limitations of documentary photography in the age of the smart phone photos and the internet.³⁹ Working through his existential crisis, he developed his first internet-based artwork, *Photography Is*, a print-on-demand book documenting internet research on the discourse of photography. Searching for what “photography is,” he parsed out pithy and pedantic statements found on the web and made them into an on-demand book called *Photography Is* (2010).⁴⁰ Containing 1700 English-language phrases, Joachim Schmid describes the book as a critical discourse on photography that “contributes as much as it ironically undermines. ... [It] hits a new level in the photography discussion as a kind of commentary on a commentary.”⁴¹ Indeed, the *Photography Is* book came out of Henner’s frustration that the discourse on photography, despite being a universal and utilitarian medium, was being controlled by a small institution-based Photographic literati.⁴² Through this process Henner came to the decision that the camera was a

³⁶ Nicola Bozzi, “News from the Textural Wasteland,” *Elephant* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 58.

³⁷ Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art*, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁹ Mishka Henner, “Counter-Intelligence” (Artist Lecture), filmed November 2, 2017 at Leeds Art Research Centre, Leeds Beckett University, UK, video 1:12:32, <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/larc/lectures/mishka-henner/>.

⁴⁰ Joachim Schmid, “Mishka Henner’s *Photography Is*,” *Philosophy of Photography* 1, no. 2 (2010): 217.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 217-18.

⁴² J. Shaw, ed., *NewFotoScapes* (Birmingham, UK: Library of Birmingham, 2014), 109, <http://www.newfotoscapes.org/>.

nostalgic tool and the computer and internet-based image making were more appropriate to the time.⁴³

Henner's first major art project using appropriated images was another print-on-demand book entitled *Winning Mentality*, purported to be a photo record of a fabricated persona named Victor Starr. In the project, which began as a series of Facebook profile pictures, he appropriated publicly available photos of celebrations of success and substituted his deadpan face for that of the winner's.⁴⁴

Henner's appropriative web-based practice categorizes him as a "post-photography" photographer. The term "post-photography" has been used since the late twentieth century, often in conjunction with the transformation from analogue to digital media. In its current iteration, post-photography has come to mean the integration of the image, technology and the Internet. Camila Moreiras explains that the "age of post-photography can be understood as the age of the inorganic image: a composite of littered information—collected, ordered, layered, buried,

stored and discarded."⁴⁵ In contemporary photographic practice, images may be built, fabricated, altered, and/or systematically edited with or without the camera.

Henner began using Google maps and other satellite images in 2010 in another book a project called *Fifty One US Military Outposts*, "reimagining" Pop/Conceptual artist Ed Ruscha's photographic book, *TwentySix Gasoline Stations* (1963).⁴⁶ Choosing military bases as his subject resulted in Henner's work being included in a number of surveillance-themed shows.⁴⁷

In 2011, again using Google Earth as a source of images, Henner turned his focus to industrial infrastructure, specifically the American oil industry. The first series he produced was entitled *18 Pumpjacks* and was released in 2012 as a softcover print-on-demand book.⁴⁸ The second series *Fields* (2012-13) comprises ten largescale works displayed in various dimensions and materials for site specific installations.⁴⁹ In searching for the ubiquitous oil pumps sprinkling rural and urban areas of Texas, Henner

⁴³ Mishka Henner, "Counter-Intelligence."

⁴⁴ Mishka Henner, *Winning Mentality* (Palo Alto: ISSUU, March 2, 2010), https://issuu.com/mishkahenner/docs/winning_mentality.

⁴⁵ Camila Moreiras, "Joan Fontcuberta: Post-photography and the Spectral Image of Saturation," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2017): 57-58.

⁴⁶ Kate Palmer Albers, "Schematic Traces: Systems of Making," in *The Focal Press Companion to the Constructed Image in Contemporary Photography*, eds. Anne Leighton Massoni and Marni Shindelman (New York: Routledge, 2018), 148. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was an artist's book by the American pop artist Ed Ruscha, published in April 1963. In this chapter Albers refers to Ed Ruscha's 1963 book containing photographic reproductions of twenty-six gasoline stations along the old Route 66, as the birth of schematic thinking in photography. Ruscha photographed and processed the images himself to get the effect he wanted. His deadpan conceptualism resulted in a distinct aesthetic representing the orderly neutrality of modern life.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 182-83.

⁴⁸ Mishka Henner, *Pumpjacks*, Mishka Henner (website) <https://mishkahenner.com/Eighteen-Pumpjacks>.

⁴⁹ Mishka Henner, *Fields*, Mishka Henner (website) <https://mishkahenner.com/Fields>.

encountered the cattle feedlots.⁵⁰ Making the link between cattle, oil and greenhouse gas emissions Henner's combined *Beef & Oil* series was shortlisted for the Prix Pictet in 2014.⁵¹

In an interview for the Focal Press, Henner said he doesn't consider himself an activist but rather "I think of what I do as propositions or provocations and the aesthetics are vital to how effective those might be."⁵² In a video lecture, "Counter-Intelligence," Henner indicated he wants "to talk about the world without speaking," leaving room for audience interpretation.⁵³ He believes that the viewer, the reader, and critics create their own meaning and that the way a work circulates and is read by various audiences constitutes part of the work.⁵⁴ To this point, Henner feels that the *Feedlots* series has been his most successful series to date, being exhibited widely in many contexts and featured in many publications to various ends.⁵⁵

Over a decade of making art, Henner's practice has been quite diverse ranging from his technical satellite work to more painterly works using graphics and paint that employ symbols that are both playful and critical of today's society.⁵⁶ One of his most controversial works is the series *No Man's Land*, first published in 2012, which depicts young women along lonely roadsides in

Italy whose images were captured by Google Street View cameras.⁵⁷ Henner has won a number of prizes and has self-published a number of books. His works are held in the Tate Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Centre Pompidou, and many other museums of fine art. Henner is a member of the ABC Artists' Books Cooperative and lives and works in Manchester, UK.

Henner's *Feedlots* Series (2012-13)

Mishka Henner's *Feedlots* series comprises seven high-resolution digital images, made by stitching together hundreds of digital screen shots taken from Google Earth:⁵⁸

- *Coronado Feeders, Dalhart, Texas, 2012*
- *Tascosa Feedyard, Bushland, Texas, 2013*
- *Randall County Feedyard, Amarillo, Texas, 2013*
- *Wrangler Feedyard, Tulia, Texas, 2013*
- *Friona Feedyard, Palmer County, Texas, 2013*
- *Centerfire Feedyard, Ulysses, Kansas, 2013*
- *Black Diamond Feeders, Harrington, Texas, 2013.*

Coming across what he thought was an aberration in Google Earth while investigating the oil extraction industry, Henner discovered masses

⁵⁰ Mishka Henner, "Counter-Intelligence."

⁵¹ Mishka Henner, "Home," Mishka Henner (website), accessed April 29, 2020, <http://mishkahenner.com>.

⁵² Albers, "Schematic Traces: Systems of Making," 184.

⁵³ Mishka Henner, "Counter-Intelligence."

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Henner's biography on his website (<https://mishkahenner.com/Biography>) lists a number of exhibitions and mentions. As well, in the "Counter-Intelligence" video lecture he describes how he makes the *Feedlots* images widely available to those that request it, for use by government agricultural organizations, animal welfare activists, art publications, media, and even the meat industry.

⁵⁶ Oakes, "In Search of New Materials," 1.

⁵⁷ Albers, "Schematic Traces: Systems of Making," 151-52.

⁵⁸ All images can be found on Henner's website at <https://mishkahenner.com/Feedlots>.

of cattle looking almost microbial in pens of bare earth interspersed with unsavory looking ponds of all shapes and colours ranging from bright red to vivid green.⁵⁹ The rectilinear lines of the infrastructure, including pens, roadways, troughing, open sewers and fences and the large rectangular and circular fields contrast with the irregular shapes of large pits filled with liquid animal waste and chemicals. These sewage pits, referred to as manure or waste lagoons or effluent ponds, resemble massive earthworks in various hues. Most of the seven images show a central manure lagoon while others have several smaller effluent ponds in a range of brackish colours. On close looking, dot-like cattle can be seen in the brown otherwise bare pens. The images appear geometrical and utilitarian—truly a constructed landscape.

To understand what he was observing via Google Earth, Henner undertook to learn about the meat industry and its methods for maximizing yield in the minimum amount of time for the highest profit. As the artist writes:

It used to take five years for a cow to reach its mature weight, ready for slaughter and processing. Today, since the structures and processes of feed yards have been perfected, that has been reduced to less than 18 months. Such speed requires growth hormones and antibiotics in cows' diets, and efficient feedlot architecture. Farmers can turn to reports to help calculate the maximum number of cattle that can fit in each pen, the minimum size

of run-off channels that carry away thousands of tons of urine and manure, and the composition of chemicals needed to break down the waste as it collects in lagoons and drains into the soil.⁶⁰

The *Feedlots* series depict just seven of the thousands of feedlots in North America where over thirty-five million cattle are either born and raised, or just “finished” prior to slaughter and processing on an annual basis.⁶¹ In North America most young cattle are silage-fed after weaning until about twelve to fifteen months old when they are shipped to a feedlot. On arrival the animals are weighed, assessed, vaccinated, and implanted with growth hormones. Cattle of the same sex and same weight are confined together in pens. On average they are on feedlots for three to six months until they reach 1400 pounds (635 kilograms).⁶² Each day they receive specialized diets laced with pharmaceuticals and growth-promoting ingredients. The animals are exposed to all kinds of weather and without bedding they may often stand deep in manure or on parched earth under the hot sun. Once “finished,” they are shipped to meat processing plants where they are slaughtered and processed into meat and by-products.

The images reify the scope and scale of the devastation caused by industrialized animal agriculture through their indexical and cartographic nature. Although featuring images of actual concentrated animal feeding operations, the works in the series take on an abstract geometric style that calls out for aesthetic analysis. Probably the most striking of the series is *Coronado*

⁵⁹ Mishka Henner, “Op-Ed: How the meat industry marks the land -- in pictures,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 27, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-marks-on-the-land-html-20151222-htmstory.html>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ According to the USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Livestock Slaughter 2018 Summary (April 2019), over 33 million cattle were slaughtered in the U.S. in 2018 and 99% of them pass through feedlots. <https://downloads.usda.library.cornell.edu/usda-esmis/files/r207tp32d/8336h934w/hq37vx004/lsslan19.pdf>. An additional 3-5 million are slaughtered in Canada.

⁶² “Feedlot Operations,” Careers in the Cattle Sector, <https://beefcareers.ca/industry-facts/feedlot-operation/>.

Feeders, Dalhart, Texas. In portrait mode it depicts a desiccated landscape above a blood red manure lagoon that gapes like an open sore. This is where the liquefied waste of 70,000 cattle is captured and treated with chemicals.⁶³ Contaminated with chemicals and pathogens the manure cannot be used for fertilizer and just becomes another source of hazardous waste.⁶⁴

Tascosa Feedyard, Bushland, Texas presents a central composition centered around a vivid green manure lagoon with pens on the left and right and fields on the top and bottom. Located near Amarillo, the Tascosa Feedyard has a capacity of 25,000 head.⁶⁵ In *Randall County Feedyard, Amarillo, Texas* rectangular cattle pens fill the left half of the image nestled around what appears to be an almost empty manure lagoon of murky red and grey on the right. At the edges are flashes of green and pale-yellow fields. *Wrangler Feedyard, Tulia, Texas* resembles *Randall County Feedyard*. The facility is virtually square edged by barren fields. *Friona Feedyard, Palmer County, Texas* is again similar in colour and geometric form but rather than a pronounced manure lagoon a dry stream bed dotted by smaller effluent ponds passes through the rectilinear pens. A quarter circle of green edging and a bright sandy rectangle provide an area of visual interest on the left top corner. These three feedlots are owned by Friona Feedlots and no capacities are available.⁶⁶ Close to square, *Centerfire Feedyard, Ulysses, Kansas* is the most curvilinear in the series and the only feedlot not located in Texas. The pens are positioned in a

sweep down and across the image in a flattened s-shape with sludge-green effluent ponds nestled close to each pen. In one field, middle right, are terraces perhaps reflecting the variability of the terrain, which as in all the images otherwise appears flat. The final image in the series is *Black Diamond Feeders, Harrington, Texas*. The image appears to be captured at a higher altitude with the brown feedlot pens occupying only a small portion of the image. The facility is triangular in form, outlined by crisp lines of unpaved roadways. The contrast between the shades of verdant and paler green, pale yellow and the brown pens and dots of deep red marking the effluent ponds makes this an interesting if troublesome composition.

Overall, the *Feedlots* Series depicts oppressive places on a large if indeterminate scale. Cheetham suggests that this kind of work, with the monotony and neutrality comparable with the works of John Gerrard, might be considered as a new kind of “sublime as overwhelming magnitude.”⁶⁷ The tedium of the landscape that results from the limited detail, unclear function and absence of signs of life may lead to a sense of bathos or anti-climax.⁶⁸ Cheetham suggests that bathos is perhaps a useful tool for eco artists struggling to present the unrepresentable.

Discussion of art in the Anthropocene often engages with the philosophical works of Timothy Morton. Morton describes climate change as a “hyperobject,” which he defines as “objects that are massively distributed in time and space,

⁶³ According to the Five Rivers website, Coronado Feeders, with a capacity of 70,000 head of cattle, is a subsidiary of JBS Five Rivers, which has combined feeding capacity of more than one million head and has facilities in Canada, Australia and Brazil. <https://www.fiveriverscattle.com/>.

⁶⁴ Carrie Hribar, *Understanding Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations and Their Impact on Communities* (National Association of Local Boards of Health, 2010), 2-3, https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Docs/Understanding_CAFOS_NALBOH.pdf.

⁶⁵ Champion Feeders, <https://championfeeders.net>.

⁶⁶ Friona Industries, <http://www.frionaindustries.com/locations>.

⁶⁷ Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art*, 102.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 101-3.

relative to human scales. They are immersive, phenomenologically viscous entities.... We find ourselves psychologically, socially, aesthetically, politically glued to them wherever we go.”⁶⁹ Morton proposes that understanding hyperobjects is essential to ecological awareness.

Morton suggests that entities like climate, radiation and the internet are hyperobjects that we interact with in part without being able to comprehend them in their entirety. Since industrialized animal agriculture has become so extensive and global in reach that the entire complex becomes unimaginable, I propose that it is a hyperobject on its own.⁷⁰ We experience parts of the hyperobject of industrial animal agriculture, it cleaves to us, in the products we buy and through a rise in greenhouse gases and environmental contamination. However, we are unable to perceive it as a whole because it is so massively distributed in time and space and because it is deliberately hidden from us by those that profit from it.

Conclusions

Contemporary eco art has emerged from a long tradition of landscape, influenced by environmental photography, land, conceptual, pop and performance art, social and research-based art practices, and a myriad of other innovations in contemporary art along the way. Despite the range of media and approaches, the subjects of domestic animals and industrial animal agriculture still seem to be contested in the ecocritical academe. Drawing on ecocritical writing of Greg Garrard, Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer, and Mark Cheetham, I describe how art involving domestic animals, particularly agricultural animals, has been segregated to the purview of

animal advocacy. Accordingly, the work of artists like Isabella La Rocca González tend to be marginalized while the works of Gerrard, Beltrá and Henner that take a “big picture” perspective, are more likely to be included in discourses and exhibitions of eco art and the Anthropocene. While González is clearly advocating for the over 70 billion land animals that are killed for food annually, she questions with good cause the exclusion of agriculture from the environmental agenda since its impact is so large.⁷¹

The realization that we are living in the era of the Anthropocene where humans and our socio-politico-techno-economic activities exert Earth-changing forces means that we are all now part of a single ecosystem. Timothy Morton and others advise that holding onto a number of false dichotomies—nature-culture, human-non-human and urban-rural—is keeping us from seeing and understanding the new realities of the Anthropocene. The existence of hyperobjects, like climate change, radiation, the internet, and I contend the global industrialized animal agricultural complex, resist comprehension and action. Art projects involved in describing, contextualizing and politicizing these overwhelming hyperobjects are important in helping viewers think ecologically.

In his 2011 article “Zero Landscapes in the Time of Hyperobjects,” Morton specifically addresses the landscape genre of art, which he says imparts a profound form of idealism about the subject—the human subject. He rhetorically asks: What kind of an ecological view is that? To have a truly ecological view we must exit from this idea of landscape, based on a first- or third- person perspective, and instead look for a zero-person perspective,

⁶⁹ Timothy Morton, “From Modernity to the Anthropocene: Ecology and Art in the Age of Asymmetry,” *International Social Science Journal* 63, no. 207-208 (March 1, 2012): 47.

⁷⁰ Timothy Morton, in *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Coexistence* (New York: Columbia UP, 2016), 42, talks about “Agrilogistics,” the form of agriculture that first developed in the Fertile Crescent around 12,000 years ago, which has subsequently developed into “global agriculture” driven by algorithms and big data—“the granddaddy hyperobject, the first one made by humans.”

⁷¹ Isabella La Rocca González, “Censored Landscapes,” Isabella La Rocca González (website), accessed April 29, 2020. <http://www.giissi.org/censored-landscapes>.

as absurd as this sounds from a traditional modernist point of view. We could at least allow other entities, sentient and non-sentient, to talk to us.⁷²

I suggest that Mishka Henner's *Feedlots* series undermines the constructed landscape of modernity and exemplifies Morton's zero-person perspective with what I am calling the "Google gaze." The Google gaze replaces the romantic and extractive gazes of modernity with unbiased images of the (extra)ordinary trapped in a spatiotemporal wasteland. It is this wasteland that must be described, contextualized and politicized by eco artists.

⁷² Timothy Morton, "Zero Landscapes in the Time of Hyperobjects," *Graz Architectural Magazine* 07 (2011): 80.

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