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Manufactured Landscapes An Interview with Ed Burtynsky

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“MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES” :
AN INTERVIEW WITH ED BURTYNSKY

Toronto-based photographic artist Edward Burtynsky (b. 1955) is the founder and president of Toronto Image Works, a landmark photographic/digital lab and technical education facility. Ed Burtynsky is involved with the executive advisory board for Contact, Canada's largest annual photo festival. Burtynsky's large format colour photographs of man-altered landscapes have been exhibited at numerous public venues including The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Albright Knox Gallery, N.Y.; L.A. County Museum of Art, Calif.; The Art Gallery of Ontario; The McMichael Canadian Collection and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. His images have appeared various periodicals, among them : *Art in America*, *Art News*, *The Smithsonian*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Flash Art*, *Blind Spot*, *Art Forum*, *Saturday Night* and *Canadian Art...*¹

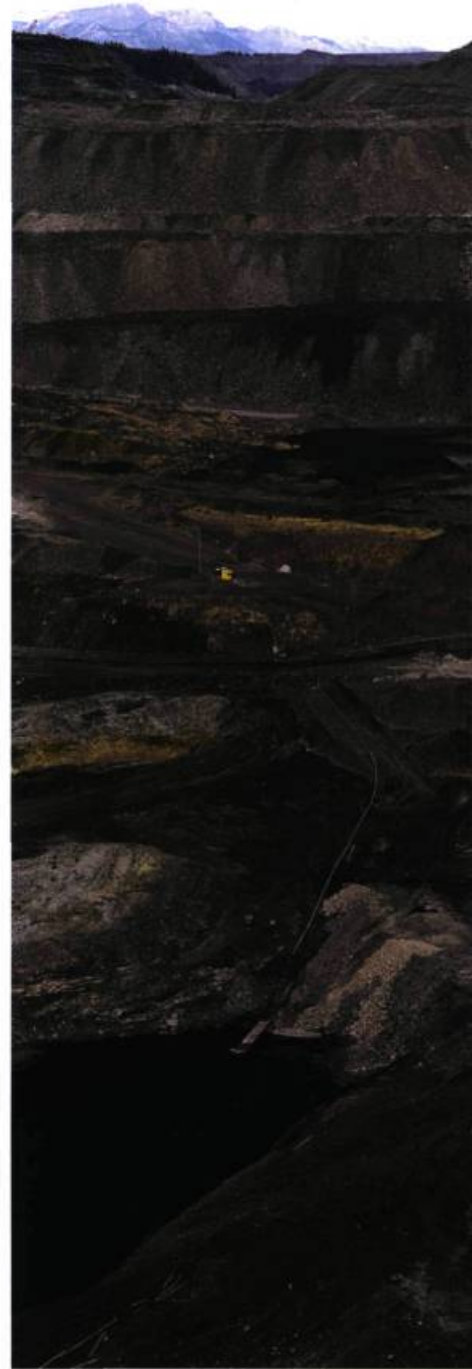
John K. Grande : *What made you decide to start your photo lab, Toronto Image Works ?*

Ed Burtynsky : When I graduated from Ryerson Polytechnic, there was no access to professional darkrooms in Toronto. After four years of working at home in the basement, I realized how inefficient my production was, and how impossible it became to realize the quality and scale of prints I envisioned. That was the original inspiration for Toronto Image Works. I decided not only to create something that would support my own creative printmaking, but also to open a facility for other artists in the city to use.

J.K.G. : *One often hears of an artist dealing with the sacred earth as a subject, and though that is fine, this brand of art can be diminished by its avoidance of world problems caused by production, pollution, toxic earth, global warming. Artists cannot whitewash what is something very real with purist aesthetics, no matter how beautiful, or ritual, or superficially sacred they may be. Your photos touch on that strange duality, for they attract us with beauty.*

E. B. : My early work looked at the pristine landscape in Canada and the United States, but after a couple of years of doing that I realized it was not enough. I wanted to probe much deeper, into the nature and visual result of our impact on the planet.

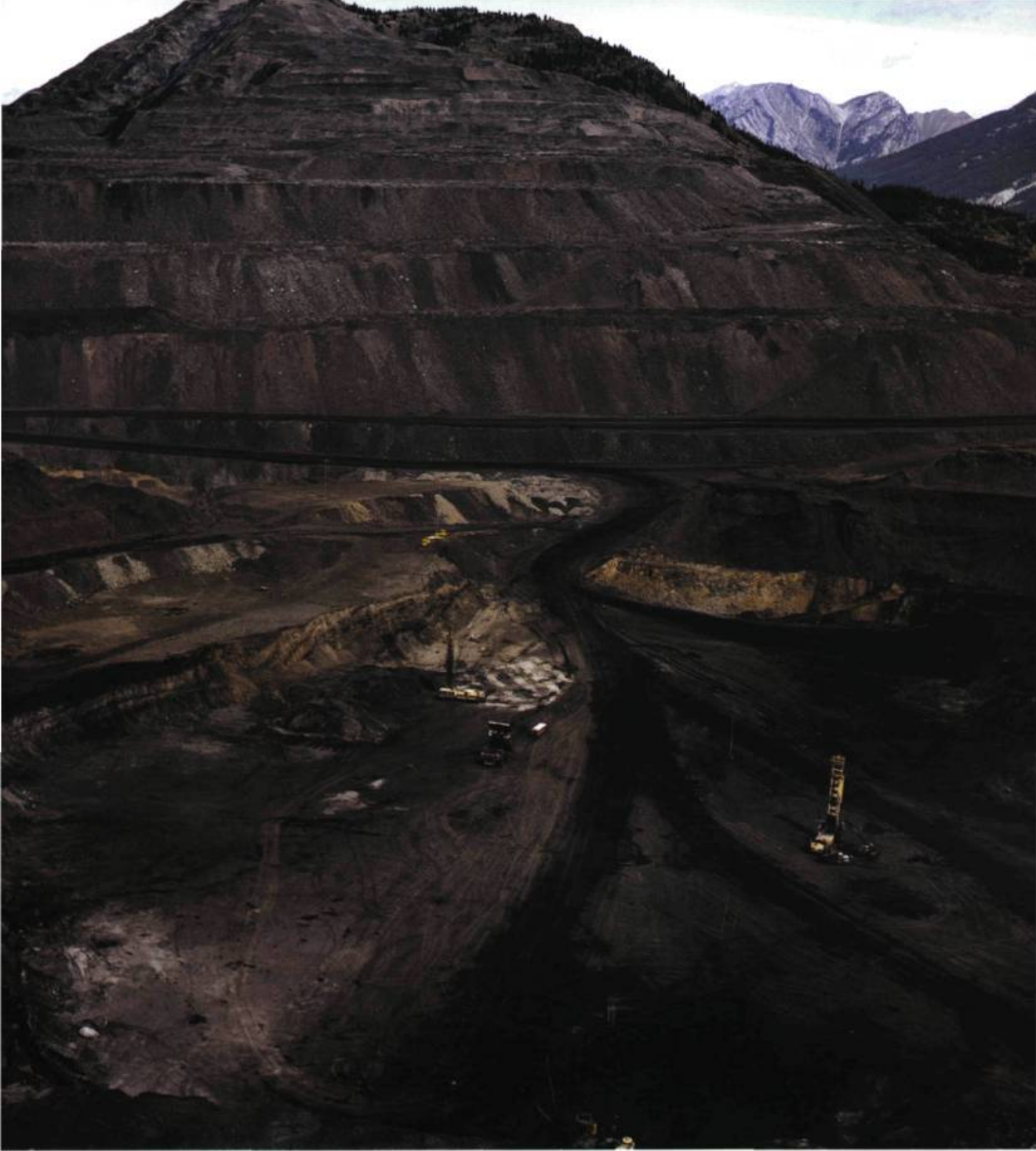
J.K.G. : *Your Quarry photos are fascinating for the consecutive cut lines resemble classical architecture of Roman amphitheatres or, in the case of the Vermont quarries, modernist architectural forms. But all this you find in nature. This is outdoors, rational, and these sites were once untamed nature. How strange, this admixture of the pictorial tradition and industrial sublime in your photography. The sense of scale, of distance and of the space you find in your*



subjects is amazing. It captures aspects of various traditions in art and of the theatre that is life, part artificial and part natural.

E. B. : And in architectural appearance they are articulated in negative rather than positive space. This can best be seen in the Rock of Ages series, where the channelling and blasting out of the blocks of stone have created imitation-cliff palaces, like faux Mesa Verdes, uninhabitable habitats – complete with ladders reaching from ledge to ledge.

J.K.G. : *Your Shipbreaking photographs from Bangladesh are taken in a Third World setting. They record a Third World industry devoted to taking apart ships that were once an integral part of the capitalist empire. The ship sections standing on shore are truly beautiful, rusted, textural and*



Ed Burtynsky, *Westar Open Pit Coal Mine # 19, Sparwood, British Columbia*, 1985. Chromogenic Colour Print; size variable.
Courtesy : Charles Cowles Gallery, New York - Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco - Nicholas Metivier, Toronto - Galeria Toni Tapies, Barcelona.

look like modernist sculptures. They even remind one of Richard Serra's or David Smith's sculptures. There is a strange, Romantic, quasi-colonial quality to your photos. We sense the photographer is a voyeur, a traveller, a temporary visitor to these sites. There is something of the 19th century travel photographers who captured views from distant lands for the people back home. One thinks of William Henry Jackson, Antonio Beato, Henri Bécharde or William Notman. Maybe we are still living in a colonial era. Perhaps the scale of the colonialism has shifted and rendered the quaint old definition of a colony redundant.

E. B. : Yes, there is something of that in my work. It often involves expeditions, where I have two or three people who travel with me. I have a scout go on reconnaissance before me, so before I arrive at a

site I know what the subject is, what locations are good, what permits are required, etc. And I hire locally as many as I need to get the job done. I have worked with as many as seven or eight people on such projects.

J. K. G. : Another stunning series you have done that is likewise sculptural is your *Densified Scrap Metal* photos from Hamilton, Ont. We are looking at compacted cubes of metal, but they are so varied and colourful, your photos capture the art in the everyday abstract expressionism meets the ready-made. This is conceptual sculpture with entropy built into it.

E. B. : When I first began the series, it was more like a pure documentary project, but as I worked through the process, I noticed that, at certain distances, the ob-

ject's usage remained apparent – an oil drum or a filter – yet it also resonated with an abstract quality that made an intriguing visual statement, without losing sight of its origins.

J. K. G. : *There is an irony to the Shipbreaking series, the Mine sites and the Densified Scrap Metal series that is interesting for its duality. You are dealing with various aspects of a highly evolved consumer society, where economies of scale work at both ends of the spectrum – production and detritus.*

E. B. : There is definitely a sense of irony. I am interested in rethinking notions of the sublime in contemporary aesthetics, whereas in the history of art, the sublime used to be associated with nature.

J. K. G. : *Your visual documents of waste processing and toxic sites are beautiful. There is no question about it. But what drew you to that subject? What brought you to investigate those things in such depth?*

E. B. : To see the landscape transformed in such an extreme way was the driving force for that work. The photographer Charles Sheeler was one of the first to recognize a strange beauty in the destruction of nature. It was definitely not accepted in the 1920s. It is still not a very popular point of view, even in the present, but it is a necessary one, that needs to be addressed.

J. K. G. : *It has a lot to do with the photo image and the frame of representation. It is like the surface of an eggshell. I think that people have difficulty in seizing on ideas unless they are presented in a beautiful way. If you see a photo*

of a waste-disposal dump, and all of a sudden you see the rationalization of waste, just as you see the rationalization of ideas in art or imagery, you start to make links in your own thinking between the way you look at the world and the way the world really is.

E. B. : Yes. Ultimately, as artists, we are involved in some form of communication. I am always interested in keeping the channels of communication open, so it is not hermetically sealed, not so coded that you have to have the inside track to understand what it is. Making it so that it is challenging our normal perceptions of the landscape. A way to say, "Here is a new landscape."

J. K. G. : *Alexander Wilson wrote a lot about the transformation of landscape, even nature parks, in The Culture of Nature. You go to a nature park, and it is not that natural. The fires this year on the West Coast are partially the result of not allowing forest fires to happen. Although your photographs are not intentionally designed to be social critiques, they do make us question consumer capitalism and the values pursued in North American culture. In other words, rendering something popular or visible. I think your photography touches on these issues but without using a heavy hammer. People have to be attracted to something before they will accept an idea.*

E. B. : That is what I think. You don't develop a dialogue by saying to somebody, "That is very ugly." That doesn't open a dialogue. It actually closes it. I find that the kind of push-pull that happens when you are drawn into something and realize you are





Ed Burtynsky, *Bao Steel # 8*, Shanghai, 2005. Digital Chromogenic Print; size variable.

Courtesy : Charles Cowles Gallery, New York - Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco - Nicholas Metivier, Toronto - Galeria Toni Tapies, Barcelona.

enjoying something you shouldn't be enjoying sets up an uneasy kind of contradiction. For me, that contradiction exists in the work, and I'm aware of it, but it's the same contradiction that I feel as a human being in our time.

J.K.G. : ...like an irradiated landscape with nuclear waste in the soil. You can walk on it, but it can kill you if you are overexposed. Your photographs are addressing a universal human dilemma. Your photographs, whether of the oldest oil derricks in North America, of a tire dump or of a mine site, deal with the way our landscape is transforming as a result of civilization. Beauty, even if what is contained in the photographic subject is ugly, ultimately attracts one. While beauty is a unifying factor, it can have a healing quality. In artistic terms it can also be limiting. Romanticism, as typified by Caspar David Friedrich's painting, was constricted by the parameters that defined it. (Ignorance is bliss, and the road to hell is paved with good intentions.)

E. B. : I was exposed to Caspar David Friedrich in 1976. What I realized was that nature was somehow segregated from the human condition. The Romantics actually invented nature, in part because they saw the Industrial Revolution coming. They realized nature was threatened by this evolution and so they reinvented nature. Nature became a nostalgic kind of thing for the Romantics, and Henry David Thoreau followed.

J.K.G. : These notions of beauty and of a sublime nature were digested, filtered and refined... a puritan ethic was added to the formula.

E. B. : ...and nature was this pure form that was being destroyed by the machine and the Industrial Revolution. But in our times the mechanical age has actually moved to the Third World. If you want to see the effects of industry, they are there in the Third World. Car companies are producing millions of cars

a year there. Cars are being shoved into cities that cannot handle them. These cities also have no pollution controls as yet. On another front, I recently went on a trip with experts to the Far North. You think of the Arctic as a kind of pure place. The Inuit women have what they call POG (Persistent Organic Pollutants), and scientists believe they arriving there from Asia, through the air currents.

J.K.G. : The arctic is even more polluted than elsewhere ?

E. B. : That's right. The Inuit have the most highly toxic mother's milk on the planet. The pollutants are coming into the food chain through seals, and they have also found that it is pervasive throughout the Arctic landscape. Again, we think of this as one of the last pristine places on the planet but it is one of the worst, despite its appearance.

J.K.G. : Do you feel at some point there is going to be some kind of complete public refusal of all art ? Even Marcel Duchamp said in his time that there are so many artists, how can it possibly be meaningful ?

E. B. : This begs the question : "Where is the world going ?" And I challenge that question. Art will survive in any case. It could even become a virus that lives in cyberspace in the future.

J.K.G. : So many artists work hard at expressing ideas. I am not sure if it even liberates them in the end. It could be a kind of prison.

E. B. : Someone originally referred to my work as subliminal activism – something that is not overt, but that says, "What are we doing ?" And that questions where we are going. Art does not provide an answer. It is far more complex than that. It is political. It is scientific. It is a whole series of layered meanings. What art can now do is present an individual perception about what is actually going on. One actually begins to see things and understand the world in a



way that clarifies in ways that words cannot. The object is not to be “liberated,” it is to simply show what exists.

J.K.G. : *I think the surrealists were trying to do that. They were trying to explain in a creative way what had been going on in the real world. What else could they do after what went on in the war ? They could not be craft artists. They could not break dimensionality. That had already been done. They had to go into some sort of personal language. But then, as they depleted their ideas, they repeated themselves, so the movement collapsed.*

E. B. : Trapped by your own form ?

J.K.G. : *Exactly. So, how is this mirrored in the real world and the currency of your work ?*

E. B. : This is going to happen with oil : more demand and less supply. There is a split right there. You will have this form of energy peak out. Unless you go to hydrogen, or some alternative like that, a monumental collapse is inevitable.

J.K.G. : *Maybe it is the same with history as with fuel. But maybe we have a peaking out with history. We have a system that is accelerating the historical process at the same time as it is peaking out. How can we even define it in traditional terms ? The economy of history is very closely linked. Natural history is not part of the equation when we talk about human history. We may have to redefine it all.*

E. B. : There is going to be a sobering moment coming to a place near you. The electricity blackout in the summer of 2003 demonstrated how tenuously

we are all connected. Had it been in winter, it would have been devastating !

J.K.G. : *I find a relation between 19th century travel photography and your approach to photographing the land. There is a carefully formulated sense of scale and even a tactile quality we associate with memory or the past in your photography that engages us visually and mimetically. No matter what the scale, your photos engulf our senses with the subjects you capture – whether a mine site, a waste dump, or the New China. Your photos catch our eye, draw us in and demand that we examine ourselves and how we think about the subjects you capture, which inevitably touches on our own lives.*

E. B. : With my photography I try to get the image and work around things. Those early travel photographers were not pretentious or manneristic, just openly reacting to stimuli and capturing their subjects as they were. They tried to find the transcendent moment.

J.K.G. : *Some elements in your photographs are a bit «off» visually. They are not completely idealized. There is always an element or two such as the movement of the workers in several of the Shipbreaking series photos that takes the picture out of the realm of stereotype and places it in the present. I like that, because it moves your aesthetic just slightly out of ideal-image category, though your photos are alluring.*

The Romantics such as Byron would go to Greece or Italy and rediscover the ruins. The whole meaning of it was not

Ed Burtynsky, *Old Factories # 2*, Tiexi District, Shenyang City, Liaoning Province, 2005. Digital Chromogenic Print; size variable.

Courtesy : Charles Cowles Gallery, New York - Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco - Nicholas Metivier, Toronto - Galeria Toni Tapies, Barcelona.





to know what the civilization had been. It was the fact that their knowledge was incomplete. There was something in the mystery of rediscovering the ruins, more important than even the real history.

E. B. : I always find ruins more interesting when I try to imagine what their lives were like. It is in the act of imagination that we idealize. We go back to another place, to moments in time where life was something other, something mythic.

J.K.G. : *Maybe it was brutal !*

E. B. : It probably was. A lot of work becomes too didactic and obvious. We live in complicated times where our lives are ambiguous. We realize that progress and capitalism and all this stuff have consequences, such as nonrenewable oil resources. We are going in a direction that is precarious and frightening.

J.K.G. : *And we are not stopping...*

E. B. : We live with the contradiction where we do not want to deny it and we do not want to give it all up because we don't know how to give it up. We are heading somewhere that is dangerous, and there is a pushing and pulling of forces. For a lot of people, that push-pull doesn't exist. They are just caught in the current, and riding with it.

J.K.G. : *Some people say there are organic models for progress. Others say that the city is itself an organism. It may look like that on the surface level. In your photos of Los Angeles autoroutes, we see tendons of highway extending out and spreading. There is very little potential for re-adaptation or remodelling of these transport routes. Some planners see a flow of cars and refer to them as a bloodstream. This is a very different analogy or comparison to make – as highways, if they are bloodstreams, must be so*



ca barytsky, Scrap Auto engines # 17, Hamilton, Ontario, 1997. Chromogenic Colour print, size variable. Courtesy: Charles Cowles Gallery, New York - Robert Koch Gallery, Toronto - Galleria Toni Tapies, Barcelona.
 ca barytsky, Scrap Auto engines # 20, Hamilton, Ontario, 1997. Chromogenic Colour print, size variable. Courtesy: Charles Cowles Gallery, New York - Robert Koch Gallery, Toronto - Galleria Toni Tapies, Barcelona.



Ed Butynsky, *Nickel Tailings # 36*, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996.
Chromogenic Colour Print; size variable. Courtesy : Charles Cowles Gallery, New York - Robert Koch Gallery,
San Francisco - Nicholas Metivier, Toronto - Galeria Toni Tapies, Barcelona.

polluted they would kill the host body. I do not understand such analogies. The automobile is actually destroying the organism.

E. B. : If we think of the arteries of a highway as the bloodstream, then a traffic jam must be like bad cholesterol ! When you look at how much real estate is eaten up by highway systems in Los Angeles it is amazing. We are actually destroying the host. That is a more accurate description of what we are doing. These things are of great interest to me. They have to do with transport and how our need of ground transport has transformed the landscape. I want to take the idea of oil, gas and cars to provide the impetus for creation of a series of images that describe how we have reshaped our environment to accommodate this new mass mobility. Highways are a perfect example of this, so right now I'm also investigating large thoroughfare structures such as cloverleaves, a.k.a. spaghetti junctions, where major highways intersect.

J.K.G. : *In your latest book of China photographs published by Steidl there is this incredible sense of scale and the dramatic shift taking place in Chinese society. Whether it is the Three Gorges Dam or Bao steel, now the world's largest steel pro-*

ducer, or the seemingly infinite interior scale of factories such as Cankun, Yu Yuan or Deda, the scenes you capture are relentless and incredible. You have written that you no longer see the world in terms of nationhood or borders or language, but as 6.5 billion humans living off a precariously balanced, finite planet. How can we envision a viable future for all of humanity with these realities to confront ?

E. B. : I am looking at the unprecedented scale of China's urbanization, the creation of new cities, urban renewal.

J.K.G. : *...and doesn't production inevitably result in great waste and destruction of resources, at a scale never imagined in previous decades ?*

E. B. : I'm following the exported computer waste, or e-waste, as it makes its way into small towns in China for disassembly and recycling. And I am also seeking out gigantic manufacturing locations and their accompanying workforces.

AN INTERVIEW DONE BY JOHN K. GRANDE



Ed Burtynsky, *Highway # 1, Intersection 105 & 110, Los Angeles, California, 2003*. Digital Chromogenic Print; size variable.
Courtesy : Charles Cowles Gallery, New York - Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco - Nicholas Metivier, Toronto - Galeria Toni Tapies, Barcelona.

NOTE

¹ And, an active lecturer on photographic art, Ed Burtynsky's recent speaking engagements include the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; George Eastman House in Rochester, N. Y.; The Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal; the Art Gallery of Ontario and Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto. His prints are housed in corporate and private collections worldwide and are included in these public collections : The National Gallery of Canada and The National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, The Museum of Modern Art, N. Y.; The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; The Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, N. Y.; Burtynsky is represented by Mira Godard in Toronto, Paul Kuhn in Calgary, Charles Cowles in

New York, Robert Koch in San Francisco and Flowers East in London, England. Along with Mark Ruwedel and Robert Smithson, Burtynsky's recent photographs were part of a show at the Freedman Gallery of the Albright College Centre for the Arts in 2003 on the theme of industry and entropy. *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky* was held at the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal. His most recent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York included 25 new photographs from China, the subject of his latest book, *Burtynsky - China* published by Steidl.