

# THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALJERY

## EXHIBITION NOTES FOR TEACHERS 19 MAY – 31 JULY 2012

**EDWARD BURTYNSKY: OIL  
RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE**

*“I want to get people to think about their world a little more through the things I photograph.”*

*“I want to use my images to persuade millions of people to join in the global debate on sustainability.”*

Edward Burtynsky



Oilfields #22 Cold Lake, Alberta Canada, 2001 © Edward Burtynsky. Courtesy Nicholas Metivier, Toronto/Flowers, London

### EXHIBITION THEMES

For more information please contact:  
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- the industrialisation of land (Burtynsky)
- photography as a medium for environmental awareness (Burtynsky)
- detail, scale and perspective as visual language (Burtynsky)
- contemporary exploration of archival photography (Raqs)
- creating meaning through placement of work (Raqs)

These notes have been researched and written by Petra Pattinson, Schools & Projects Organiser, The Photographers' Gallery

We recommend that you make a pre-visit to the exhibition before bringing a class. Please visit our website for information about workshops that we offer for primary and secondary education.

## STUDENTS WILL

- see three sections from Edward Burtynsky's series OIL: Extraction and Refinement, Transportation and Motor Culture and The End of Oil;
- experience the ways in which Burtynsky uses photography as a visual art form to reveal the damage humans have done to the environment and influence environmental awareness
- see how the artists from Raqs Media Collective explore the ways we read fact and fiction in an archival historical photograph;
- explore how language placed in different contexts can create new meanings.

## INTRODUCTION

**Edward Burtynsky** (b. 1955, Ontario, Canada) has travelled the world to document oil extraction, refinement, use and effects. This exhibition OIL shows a selection of work from this 12 year project. Burtynsky uses large format and digital cameras to produce large scale, highly detailed photographs that show the processes necessary for, and results of, our growing dependency on oil as a source of non-renewable energy.



Raqs Media Collective

*"We make art, we publish, we curate, we create spaces and situations."*

*"The less-than-visible elements in an image are just as interesting as the visible."*

Raqs Media Collective

**Raqs Media Collective** brings together three Delhi-based - Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. - film graduates who formed a collective in Delhi in 1992 and make film, new media and photography work, as well as working as writers and curators. Their work *An Afternoon Unregistered on the Richter Scale*, 2011 is a silent looped video projection of an archival photograph which plays with stillness and movement. In the same exhibition space is their sculpture - *36 Planes of Emotion* - that plays with relationships between objects, language and meanings.

*“In 1997, “It occurred to me that all the vast man-altered landscapes I had perused for over 20 years had been made possible by the discovery of oil and the progress occasioned by the internal combustion engine. Over the next 12 years I researched and photographed the largest oil fields I could find. I went on to make images of refineries, freeways interchanges, automobile plants and the scrap industry resulting from the recycling of cars. I began to look at motor culture, where vast tribes come together with vehicles as the main attraction”*

Edward Burtynsky

**Manufactured Landscapes**, (2006 ) is a feature length documentary film about the work of photographer Edward Burtynsky. Directed by Jennifer Baichwal and distributed by Zeitgeist Films.



SOCAR Oil fields #6, Baku Azerbaijan, 2006 © Edward Burtynsky. Courtesy Nicholas Metivier, Toronto/Flowers, London

## **BURTYNSKY: OIL PRE VISIT – ACTIVITIES & QUESTIONS**

- Discuss Ed Burtynsky’s quote describing how he started his project OIL.
- Produce a list of everything that we use and rely on that has its origins in oil and its by-products.
- What is oil? Where does it come from? [www.abc.net.au/science/crude/](http://www.abc.net.au/science/crude/)
- Listen to Burtynsky talk about his work at the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Prize ceremony:  
[www.ted.com/talks/edward\\_burtynsky\\_on\\_manufactured\\_landscapes.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/edward_burtynsky_on_manufactured_landscapes.html)
- Research and discuss the definition of ‘landscape’.

Burtynsky has said that as a fine art photographer inspired by nature, particularly as a result of growing up in Canada, he kept falling into the trap of taking picturesque “calendar art” type landscape pictures. It was a wrong turn, driving and getting lost in Pennsylvania that he came across an open coal mine, which was a landscape, “totally surreal, transformed by man”. This he described as his base line, his theme that set him off on his research to produce early works like ‘Homesteads’ and ‘Mines’ (1983-1985) These works also show how he rethought the traditions of landscape photography.

- Find examples of Burtynsky’s earlier work and explain how you think his work has developed and how it has challenged traditional ideas of landscape photography.
- Discuss why Burtynsky describes himself as a fine art photographer?

## **BURTYNSKY: OIL VISIT TO THE EXHIBITION – ACTIVITIES & QUESTIONS**

The galleries show work from three sections of Burtynsky's project OIL. The exhibition begins in the Top Gallery with the section *Extraction and Refinement*; then moves down one floor to the Barbara Lloyd Gallery where the other two sections – *Transportation and Motor Culture* and *The End of Oil* – are shown.

- What are your first impressions when entering the Top Floor exhibition space?

*“The one operating principle in my work is scale.”*

*“Human beings taking things from nature to provide for themselves is not new, but the scale is. So if I wanted to photograph a quarry, I'd look for the biggest to show the gigantic proportions of what we take from the land”.*

Edward Burtynsky

The places photographed in the exhibition sections *Extraction and Refinement* and *The End of Oil* are often remote and unknown. Although they are vast, they are out of view and not places we are likely to experience. Burtynsky has said that he wants his audience to be engaged by both the beauty and the horror of his images – to be both attracted and repelled. He suggests that it is this contradiction that he feels by both wanting a good life with all the consumer trappings but at the same time knowing the consequences of this for the future of the planet. Similarly he is not hostile to the corporations that he has to work with to negotiate access to take his photographs, but he is all for promoting sustainability and connecting us with these worlds that we can't see yet determine all our lives.

The large format photographic process that Burtynsky uses enables acute detail within large-scale prints. Some works are presented together as **diptychs** to further communicate the vastness of the landscape.

Burtynsky uses helicopters, cranes and other high vantage points to create aerial, 'birds eye view' shots of the places and subjects he photographs. He rarely uses close up.

- How does this 'distancing' contribute to the meaning of his photograph?

Some of his subject matter like, *Densified Oil Filters, Hamilton, Ontario Canada, 1997* fills the photograph – making the image opaque and not allowing the viewer to move into the frame and experience the illusion of space.

- What effect does this technique of depicting shallow spaces create?
- Select an image that particularly attracts you and describe the photograph in terms of both its visual qualities, light, colour, detail, scale, perspective and its subject matter.
- Discuss if the series presented in these sections of OIL tell a story, and if so would it be better described in the form of a book (monograph) or in a gallery setting?

Take turns to listen to the interview with Edward Burtynsky in the Resource Area on the Fourth Floor or try out the OIL App on the iPads. Discuss whether this adds or detracts from your experience of the exhibition.

- Would Burtynsky be able to communicate his ideas as effectively if the works were not presented collectively as a project?



Breezewood, Pennsylvania, USA, 2008 © Edward Burtynsky. Courtesy Nicholas Metivier, Toronto/Flowers, London

## **BURTYNSKY: OIL POST VISIT – ACTIVITIES & QUESTIONS**

Edward Burtynsky has been described as following in the footsteps of 19th century landscape photographers in North America like Timothy O’Sullivan, Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson who worked for the government using the then new photographic processes available as a means of surveying and mapping unknown territories for land development and historical documentation.

- Research the work of these early landscape photographers. Consider how photography has played a major role in our awareness of both landscape and environmental issues.

We are familiar with photographs of the ‘outdoors’. Often they depict either **utopian** styled views suggesting a **picturesque**, orderly and controlled environment or an unruly world expressing the **sublime** forces of nature.

- Select examples of photographs, paintings and drawing that describe utopian, picturesque and sublime views of nature.

Burtynsky’s work is considered to be “a new form of epic **history painting**” in that his projects take the form of a serious narrative which speaks of our world in its present state and using the theme of industrialisation as an allegory for the planet’s destruction through the actions of humans’ perpetual strife for progress.

- Find examples of ‘history painting’ and research the stories they are telling and the visual techniques used to express a particular point of view. Develop these ideas to produce a photographic diptych.
- Discuss how a utopian vision of the land might be portrayed versus a dystrophic one. Find examples from a variety of art forms (writing, film, photography, painting).

- Research an environmental issue in your school/college or local community. For example your local council's systems for recycling or describing your class group's 'carbon footprint', and produce a series of photographs which express your ideas from your findings.
- Explore and experiment taking photographs of the environment from different perspectives and points of view. Using the resources available to experiment with the scale of the final selected images. If possible print to A3 using a photocopier. Some photocopy shops offer affordable prices for black and white A1 or A2 size photocopies.
- Produce a series of photographs that portray a utopian vision of your local landscape, and a series that portray a dystrophic one. Find or create text to accompany the photographs. The text could be a poem, a narrative, music, performance, scientific facts, etc. Consider the most effective and interesting ways that you could present the series and texts to an audience (performed, projected, published as a book, newspaper or zine , on-line, on a wall etc.)
- Write a review of the exhibition (about 300 words) and accompanying it with a photo of your self in The Photographers' Gallery (but not in the galleries where photography is not allowed due to copyright issues with all the art works). Email your review and photo (as a jpeg) with your name and school and age/year level to [projects@tpg.org.uk](mailto:projects@tpg.org.uk). A selection will be displayed on our website.

Highway #1, Intersection 105 and 110, Los Angeles, California USA, 2003 © Edward Burtynsky.  
Courtesy Nicholas Metivier, Toronto/Flowers, London





An Afternoon Unregistered on the Richter Scale, 2011. Video still © Raqs Media Collective. Courtesy the artists/Frith Street Gallery

## RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE PRÉ VISIT – ACTIVITIES & QUESTIONS

*“Reading the photograph then is to read into all the things that it says, and at least into some of the things it does not say. Listening to its silences is an act of the imagination. It is here that the artist is able to do a few things that the historian is inhibited from doing”.*

How do we look at photographs from the past? How do you see photos of yourself as a child, pictures of your grandparents, pictures unknown to you? Often a friend or family member will tell us the story behind a photograph and that interpretation feeds our memory of an event or situation in a photograph. Sometimes people who were photographed together in one photograph will give different accounts of what they remember!

The photograph is an archive, a record or document of something that happened at some point in time. But does this make what we see in the photograph a ‘fact’ or ‘true’? Do we consider who took the photograph, how and why? What were the circumstances involved and what did the photographer **not** include in the frame?

Raqs Media Collective are interested in playing with ideas of what makes ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. And what the differences might be – if any.

- Present a selection of photographs taken 10 or more years ago. They could be personal, historical or found. Discuss the quote (left) by Raqs Media Collective in relation to your selection.
- Refer to your examples of archival photographs and discuss ways in which you would describe and interpret the photograph from the point of view of a historian, and then from an artist’s point of view.
- Depending on your knowledge of the photographs you have gathered, try writing either a ‘factual’ or ‘imaginary’ account of what it is about. See if your classmates can guess whether you have written something ‘true’ or ‘made up’.
- Visit Raqs Media Collective website and describe the various different mediums they use, and ways they present their ideas: <http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/>
- Many contemporary artists work collaboratively; consider the advantages and the disadvantages of working collectively.

From: In The Theatre of Memory: The Work of Contemporary Art in the Photographic Archive, Raqs Media Collective In Lalit Kala Contemporary #52 (Journal), Photography as Art and Practice in India, 2012)

## RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE EXHIBITION VISIT – ACTIVITIES & QUESTIONS

“The archival photograph contains both the presence as well as the absence of the historical within its surface”.  
Raqs Media Collective

In this work, *An Afternoon Unregistered on the Richter Scale* Raqs Media Collective have worked with an archival photograph originally titled ‘Examining Room of the Duffing Section of the Photographic Department of the Survey of India’. It was taken in 1911 by British photographer James Waterhouse. The men at work are checking large glass negatives for faults. The pencilled note on the back of the photograph reads: ‘*Duffing Section. Examining Room. Every negative that corrected proof & colour patterns before being sent in for printing. This is the room where the duffing was carried out in your time. Mr Vieux at the desk, he is Head Asst. in charge of this section.*’

The artists have intervened and appropriated the archival image in order to create a silent animated video projection loop.

- Describe what happens in the projection and how Raqs have used their imagination and involved themselves in changing the original photograph into a new work.

The artists describe *An Afternoon Unregistered on the Richter Scale* as being about, “a trace of an event that doesn’t get registered”. The word ‘trace’ is used to mean a sign of something that was once present but is no longer there, or to detect something which is such that it can’t be made tangible or clear. We are used to believing in what we see in a photograph and think of it as being truthful, but this also raises questions. For example what about all that isn’t in the photo – that lies outside the frame? And what about the story that tells us why and how the photo was created?

- Discuss how Raqs might be ‘re-tracing’ a historical moment by appropriating this archival photograph.

A frame, creating a boundary around the projection, has been retained by the artists to refer to the original photograph, but its scale still has the effect of making you feel like you are in the same space as the men in pictured working in the office.

- Discuss your experience of the projection and its scale.

Indigo blue originated in India and its use by the artists in the work has far reaching historical and cultural references particularly in relation to British Colonialism and its corresponding era of Enlightenment. The East Indian Company imported indigo dye into England, Issac Newton incorporated the colour into his optical theories and it is the dye used to create denim – jeans being a trademark of western culture. In Hindu and Buddhist religion indigo is the symbolic colour for ‘the third eye’ that describes ‘inner’ mental images and a state of higher or different consciousness.

- Discuss how you think the use of the colour Indigo to tint the colours of the men’s shirts, references India’s history and adds to the way Raqs have chosen to interpret the original photograph.

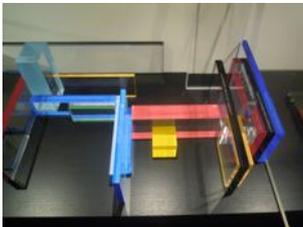


Installation of 36 Planes of Emotion, 2011  
© Raqs Media Collective. Courtesy the artists/Frith Street Gallery



Look closely at the sculptural installation **36 Planes of Emotion** and describe everything that is familiar and commonplace; reading lamps, a sideboard and perspex rectangular shapes.

Read the phrases that are etched onto the book-shaped objects and discuss the ideas and meanings that they conjure up and suggest.



36 Planes of Emotion (details),  
2011 © Raqs Media Collective.  
Courtesy the artists/Frith Street  
Gallery

In the tradition of many conceptual artists Raqs explore, employ and play with language in their art practice. “All words and all images are special to us. We do not discriminate between the sensory data that we receive. There is no hierarchy.” All language is involved in producing meanings. Poets and writers will put words together in unusual ways to create unexpected and new meanings. More often than not we don’t have the words to say what we think. Dreams have a language, which is often impossible to capture in words. These areas or gaps of communication are interesting precisely because they can’t be captured by any logical language system.

*36 Planes of Emotion* asks you to actively participate in making meanings from the work.

- What associations do the words and the objects make?
- Can words be objects?
- A book is full of letters which when encoded creates experiences by the reader that aren’t experienced. Try describing what happens when you read a story.

The title of the work – *36 Planes of Emotion* – seems to suggest the idea of a plane being both a flat material surface and a level of mental activity (like describing someone as being on ‘another plane of thought’). In so doing they are playing with ideas of something being both inanimate and material and conscious and alive.

## **RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE POST VISIT – ACTIVITIES & QUESTIONS**

- Compare the work of Raqs and Edward Burtynsky – make connections with photography as a means of ‘mapping’ or surveying the environment. Consider how scale has been used, and to what effect, in works by both artists.
- The Surrealists played word games that ‘freed up’ our control of words and enjoyed the enigmatic effects of language. Automatic writing is the most direct of Surrealist techniques.

Experiment with automatic writing by playing this game:  
Sit at a table with pen and paper; put yourself in a ‘receptive’ frame of mind, and start writing. Continue writing without thinking about what is appearing beneath your pen. Write as fast as you can. If, for some reason, the flow stops, leave a space and immediately begin again by writing down the first letter of the next sentence. Choose a letter at random before you begin, for instance, a ‘t’, and always begin this new sentence with a ‘t’.

Although in the purest version of automatism nothing is ‘corrected’ or re-written, the unexpected material produced by this method can be used as the basis for further composition. What is crucial is the unpremeditated free association that creates the basic text. *Surrealist Games* (Alastair Brotchie, Redstone Press)

- Produce several photocopies from one of your archival photograph selections. Cut, collage, colour or reassemble the copies, keeping some reference to the original, to create an alternative version of the original. Scan or re photograph the result(s).
- Develop a script or piece of writing in response to an archival photograph. Describe how the written piece could be performed as a short film or a song.

## **VISITOR INFORMATION**

### **ADMISSION FREE OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK**

Monday – Saturday 10.00 – 18.00

Thursday 10.00 – 20.00

Sunday 11.30 – 18.00

### **THE CAFÉ IS OPEN**

Monday – Friday 9.00 – 18.00

Thursday 9.00 – 20.00

Saturday 10.00 – 18.00

Sunday 11.30 – 18.00

### **GROUP VISITS**

If you are planning on bringing a group larger than 10 to the Gallery, please contact us at +44 (0)20 7087 9300

### **STAFF LED GROUP TOURS**

A limited number of tours for school, college and community groups are available. Visit our website or telephone for more information. £25 per group of up to 30 people.

## **CONTACT US**

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