

# LANDSCAPE TRAVERSED

We can think abstractly about the world only to the degree to which the world itself has already become abstract. — Fredric Jameson<sup>[1]</sup>

Look at Frank Breuer's **Poles** and what you see, as the artist says himself, is a series of portraits. Each utility pole stands squarely in the middle of a picture that is seemingly organised around it, the artist leaving the same margin above the pole as below while other salient features—buildings, cars, trees—are confined to the middle-distance and background. There is little in any of these shots to divert the viewer's attention from the central motif. Breuer is careful to exclude human figures. The images are static, give or take the odd moving car in the distance. True, the artist occasionally gives in to the temptation of including an eye-catching detail, usually for comic effect. In one image, for instance, a red-and-white fire hydrant appears next to the pole, looking like a stunted sidekick. In another, a giant hammer that doubles as a shop-sign ("Hall Hardware") rises in the background, suggesting for a moment that we think of the pole in the foreground as an over-sized nail. But for the most part Breuer seems anxious to purge his images of anecdotal interest, and to present each location as a backdrop, a setting that largely effaces itself before the central motif. He also works, in the process of developing the shots, to give the poles added presence. He minimizes the tonal differences between foreground and background but

slightly darkens the poles, which take on a density or thereness that sets them apart from their surroundings.

A portrait is a likeness that draws out the singularity of the sitter. To claim that these photos are like portraits is to say that Breuer is encouraging the viewer to see each pole as singular—and so, in a sense, he is. His images are, it would seem, informed by a will to isolate the specific characteristics of each pole. And their presentation in the form of a series, each image conforming to broadly the same compositional blueprint, offers a matrix for comparison and so brings the particular profile of each site and pole into sharper relief. The taxonomic format is a means of framing the poles so that they appear not as interchangeable instantiations of a category but as specific objects that tell of local contingencies. After all, the photographic archive has often served a commemorative purpose by attending to the distinctness of different entities within a specified grouping, as it did in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who taught Breuer in Düsseldorf. The Bechers focused on industrial structures of a given kind (cooling towers, grain silos, etc), shot them from close quarters and then exhibited the photos together in what they called "typologies". In their work, each image took

its place in a larger sequence that brought out the variations on an architectural theme. Breuer's work insinuates itself into the same archival tradition, with its emphasis on the thereness and specificity of the motif.

So as we look at the photos we notice that several poles lean to one side and that some carry large transformers. A few are doubled, one pole reinforcing another. Many have one crossbeam; others have a couple; a few have none at all. And their cables vary in thickness and in number. These observations come naturally; in fact, there is no avoiding them. The project prompts them at every turn. Both the portrait-like treatment of the poles and the archival thrust of the project as a whole push us to scan the images for differences and to imagine that those differences are significant. But are they? Utility poles are common features of our environment, so common, in fact, that we are liable to overlook them. As objects of study, they are unlike the structures that were photographed by the Bechers, who evoked a declining industrial order in terms that were at once measured and arresting, playing as they did on the monolithic appearance of a blast furnace or cooling tower. By comparison, Breuer's poles are almost comically mundane, and the task of minutely surveying them, of noting similarities and differences, is not obviously revealing to those of us who are not civil engineers. The apparent commitment, in **Poles**, to the specific and the place-bound can be seen as ironic. But it can also be seen as signalling a desire for singularity, for an environment that can be read and parsed, for a world, in other words, in which no two places are the same.

That desire is then systematically frustrated throughout the series. Breuer seems to seek out particularly bland locations, photographing poles near parking lots, gas stations, warehouses and mini-malls. He has a liking

for sites that are neither densely inhabited nor rural and have few obvious landmarks—what we see in his shots are the lost corners of small towns and generic suburbs. Most of the locations loosely match Marc Augé's description of "non-place": they are without historical density and they facilitate flows rather than contact.<sup>[2]</sup> Breuer chooses places that see little pedestrian traffic, where the buildings are mostly box-like and low and the brighter touches are confined to roadside billboards. The poles appear in landscapes that are wholly shaped by the imperatives of cheap and easy construction, commercial seduction and quick transit. Though the vegetation occasionally provides a rough geographical pointer, many of the photos could have been taken almost anywhere in North America. That said, Breuer is careful to avoid the dramatic undercurrents that colour some representations of non-place. His locations are nondescript but he never gives them the hellish banality of, say, Martha Rosler's airports. Rosler works to make non-place look so alienating, so airless and bleak, that it takes on a quasi-hallucinatory quality; in her airport photos, the corridors are crushingly long, the lounges are windowless and the lighting is lurid. In **Poles**, non-place is unspectacular and familiar.

So Breuer has set the viewer an impossible task. The photos ask to be viewed as records of specific locations, but the locations turn out to be largely anonymous. And the poles entrench the contradiction; by their positioning, they give the images a portrait-like air, but they are also emblems of the very processes that prevent the images from functioning as portraits. Because, of course, the poles are minor nodes in infrastructures that cover vast territories. Their cables carry telephone and television signals as well as mains electricity; some poles also support thicker fiber-optic cables for broadband communications. Each pole



Untitled  
 Antwerpen, Belgium, 2002  
 Index # 1156 Antwerpen  
 C-print, Diasec on MDF  
 57 x 71 x 2.2 cm  
 Image: 31.8 x 40 cm



Untitled  
 Le Havre, France, 2002  
 Index # 1122 Le Havre  
 C-print, Diasec on MDF  
 40 x 50 x 1.8 cm  
 Image: 20.8 x 26.5 cm

facilitates the transfer of energy and data, connecting a small area to a larger grid. In fact, it will in many cases carry flows that largely bypass its immediate environs. The poles are like the cars that can occasionally be seen in the background: they turn their locations into places between other places, vectors in journeys or transmissions that have other starting points and destinations. So the images show locations that both lack singularity and serve as way-stations in larger circuits; the series triggers a quest for the signs of place in locations that are placeless twice over. And the suggestion is that there may be a connection between the two. The work effectively asks whether non-place may not be a by-product of the networks that undergird today's economic order.

That question impels not just this project but much of the work that Breuer has realized over the last few years. His **Logos**, **Warehouses** and **Containers** all examine networks as they bed themselves in the

landscape. In those projects, he works as he does in **Poles**, isolating a motif, shooting it so that it sits squarely in the middle of the composition and then following the same procedure throughout the series. The car is invisible but ever-present in these images of roadside fixtures that were captured by the artist as he drove through the business parks and suburban retail zones of Western Europe. The projects touch on the networks of private transport but focus on those of global corporatism, on the spread and visibility of major brands and on the distribution of goods and services across markets. And in many of these images, certainly in the **Logos** and **Warehouses**, Breuer manages to introduce a subtly disturbing lapse between the network and the landscape.

In **Logos**, for instance, he gives the commercial signs a slender monumentality as they tower over their drab, almost featureless surroundings. The brightly colored signs appear with striking clarity against dull white-ish



Untitled  
Liège, Belgium, 1995  
Index # 545 Liège  
C-print, Diasec on MDF  
40 x 30 x 1.8 cm  
Image: 20.8 x 16.4 cm



Untitled  
Longwy, Belgium, 1996  
Index # 535 Longwy  
C-print, Diasec on MDF  
37.4 x 156.3 x 2.9 cm

skies; and as they are shot head-on, they look bizarrely flat, seemingly floating away from their settings to participate in the flatness of the photos themselves. Breuer isolates and aggrandizes the signs, giving them a potent, almost magical presence that is at odds with—and so effectively underlines—the vacuity and dismal familiarity of roadside advertising. And Breuer works to integrate the shots, harmonizing the off-whites of his skies and setting the horizon lines at broadly the same level throughout. He also exhibits the photos in rows, keeping the spacing relatively tight. All of this encourages the viewer to see the images as both separate shots and passages in a single, overarching landscape. The integration of the photos calls attention to the sameness of the signs and so highlights the indifference of the corporate world to the particularities of different locations. What each sign seems to advertise is not a product but its own equivalence to all the other signs.

Similar processes are at work in **Warehouses**. In this series, Breuer opts for a horizontal format but often retains, in his framing of the buildings, the frontality of the commercial signs in **Logos**, with the result that the warehouses appear simply as rectangles of color. They look enormous, flat and insubstantial, their synthetic colors and corrugated surfaces looking anomalous against the surrounding greenery. Breuer generally avoids photographing their entrances and loading bays; the sides he shoots are almost completely devoid of doors and windows. He stresses the alien character of the warehouses, their apparently random irruption in the landscape, while at the same time erasing all overt signs of human activity within them. So the buildings come to seem like apparitions, like structures that have no volume or purpose.

This is how Breuer operates. He chooses fixtures that are designed to receive only passing attention and subjects them to sustained scrutiny, giving them a



Untitled  
 Bochum, Germany, 1995  
 Index # 443 Bochum  
 C-print, Diasec on MDF  
 47 x 101 x 2.2 cm



Untitled  
 Herentals, Belgium, 2003  
 Index # 1254 Herentals  
 C-print, Diasec on MDF  
 57 x 78.5 x 2.2 cm

centrality, even a monumentality, that they struggle to live up to and that occasionally unhinges them, turning them into odd, aleatory, seemingly senseless structures. After all, their functions are screened off; we never see what the warehouses contain or what the signs advertise. The fixtures are flattened and simplified, reduced to brightly colored geometric forms, to the ciphers of a displaced commercial vocation. In other words, they become monuments at the cost of their intelligibility as purposeful features of a networked environment. Above all, Breuer separates them from their surroundings. He uses a variety of discreet formal devices to suggest that the fixtures and their locations belong to different orders of reality. He does not offer a romantic defense of place—he never makes allowances for local histories or geographies. In his work, the networks of global production and communications are constellations that exist independently of older territorialities but are scrambled in turn by his compositional decisions, which tighten and foreground

their continuities only to deprive them of legible functions.

Manuel Castells has written of the networks that direct global streams of capital and information, maintaining that power is secured today not by controlling institutions but by gaining access to those networks. And he goes on to argue that the “network society” systematically undermines the logic and politics of place. All locations, large and small, are absorbed into the “space of flows”, but some become major hubs, communicating chiefly with other major hubs, while locations that tap smaller markets or lack the necessary (educational, technological) infrastructures become minor nodes and often enter economic decline. Castells points out that the network society is dominated by international financial and technocratic elites, who, in their mobility, stand apart from the communities that have benefited least from new information technologies, sapping and evading the

efforts of those communities to organize and defend their (local) interests.<sup>[3]</sup>

Breuer's work of the last ten years is an attempt to trace the new topographies of an economic order that relies increasingly on vast circuits of communication and exchange. It is an attempt that is tinged with a willed naivety; both **Logos** and **Poles** point to flows but show only their material supports. As Castells suggests, the forces that shape today's world often take the form of immaterial or invisible processes; this is what prompts Fredric Jameson to write that the present technological order resists representation.<sup>[4]</sup> Breuer's project is colored by an awareness of that resistance, but he carries on regardless, as if you could capture data streams and brand penetration on film, just as the Bechers captured the sites and instruments of post-war manufacturing. He makes as if to examine the space of flows only to itemize its infrastructural supports as they implant themselves in landscapes that are largely conditioned—that is to say, stripped, tidied up, reticulated—by the networks that cut across them. Misaligning his ostensible theme and method, he sets out to examine flows in shots that are composed and arranged to draw out the local and the particular, and so eclipses both the flows and the particular contours of each locality.

**Poles** is the latest installment in a larger project. More than that, it can be seen as drawing together and streamlining the central concerns of Breuer's work to date. Bundling its cables, it approaches the network in its generality—in its most tentacular and immaterial forms. And, like his earlier works, **Poles** pursues, with a fine, misplaced rigor, the image of a place that reveals itself through the networks that traverse it. That conceptual sleight-of-hand is at the heart of Breuer's work; it is the structural form of his pessimism and the cornerstone of his humor. And in **Poles** it is given a grim but similarly comic extension. When the images are lined up on the wall, they work independently as so many portraits of ghostly models, but as they are hung in neat rows, they also read, like the images in **Logos**, as a series of windows that look out onto a single landscape—a landscape which, given the project's taxonomic brief, can implicitly be understood as the only landscape, as all there is to see. For a moment, the cables look as if they could be suspended between one image and the next, turning the series into a representation of the world as a series of closed circuits straddling a territory that has been transformed into non-place across the whole of its surface. In this vision, the network has superseded the communities it originally served, and experience and commonality exist only as pulses that course along cables.

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[1] Fredric Jameson, **The Political Unconscious**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1981, p.66

[2] Marc Augé, **Non-Places; Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity**, translated by John Howe, Verso, London and New York, 1995

[3] Manuel Castells, **The Rise of the Network Society (Second Edition)**, Blackwell, Malden (Mass.) and Oxford, 2000, esp. pp.407-59

[4] Fredric Jameson, **Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism**, Duke University Press, Durham (North Carolina), 1991, p.36