
Editorial Introduction

Landscape, Cultural Spaces, Ecology

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It was during a discussion at the November 2005 UAAC conference in Victoria, British Columbia, following our participation in a panel on “The Visual Art and Culture of Ecology,” that we had the idea of proposing this special issue of *RACAR*. It had long been apparent that current problems tied to climate change, the abusive use of natural resources, the deterioration of terrestrial and aquatic flora and fauna, and the effects of globalization had prompted many artists, like their colleagues in other professions, to reopen the question of human relations to the natural environment. Two international conferences would confirm the growing importance of this direction. One was *Art and Ecology*, hosted by the London School of Economics in December 2006. The second, in which we both participated, was *Environment, Aesthetic Engagement and the Public Sphere: the stakes in landscape*, held in Paris the following May (and in this special issue, the conference’s co-organizer Nathalie Blanc presents a summary of its themes).

As we investigated further we also took into account the renewed interest in recent decades in concepts of landscape—and of *paysage*, the French “equivalent,” which is not really quite the same—and the consequent re-examination of Renaissance traditions that persisted through modernity and beyond. “Landscape” today has a great plurality of meanings relating to representation and to places represented, to sites for constructing identity and to places of human occupation, tying cultural space to social and geographic space, climate, and ecology. Our questions, finally, were: How do current artistic practices deal with the aesthetic, social, and ecological implications of landscape in relation to cultural and natural spaces? And which among these artistic practices might actually contribute to the reformulation of obsolete paradigms and even to the actual reversal of ecological decline?

Although the perspectives and subjects of the writers in this special issue are diverse, certain theoretical directions emerged as particularly important. Among contemporary French thinkers, Anne Cauquelin, Félix Guattari, Henri Lefebvre, and Jacques Rancière proved to be essential. On the anglophone side, our authors relied on Arnold Berleant, Kenneth Olwig, and W.J.T. Mitchell. Finally, the eighteenth-century German school still forms part of the background for rethinking the idea of “nature.” Amanda Boetzkes proposes a rereading of Kantian philosophy to reveal the ecological implications of the structure of sublime experience, showing that in Kant, nature is understood as a representation growing out of the relations between reason and imagination, never an exterior but rather an aesthetic experience inscribed within the self. In fact, this philosophical position is not unrelated to the positions of contemporary thinkers such as W.J.T. Mitchell, cited by Amanda Boetzkes and Édith-

Anne Pageot, and Arnold Berleant, cited by Tim Collins, Nathalie Blanc, and Édith-Anne Pageot. Berleant deconstructs the separation between the natural and the artificial in recalling that the limits of this supposed exteriority are always vague, porous, and variable. Where exactly can one situate the limit between the self and the outside world? In the private space of the home? Within one’s clothes? One’s skin? The air that we breathe? For Berleant, there are no relations of exteriority between nature and culture: they are one, inseparably. Interrelations between the whole and the parts are inherent, and nature is thus envisioned as an inclusive totality. The term “environment,” according to Berleant, properly designates the whole complex of interactions of living organisms and their relations to physical, chemical, cultural, and geographic factors and conditions. This is what he means when he affirms that “environment is nature experienced, nature lived.” The idea parallels Henri Lefebvre’s more specific assertion that public space results from “the interaction of *spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation.*” As Nathalie Blanc emphasizes, such a position encourages real aesthetic engagement as a mode of active knowledge of one’s milieu, to be undertaken, ideally, by every human being.

The meticulous study of the etymology of the word “landscape” by the geographer Kenneth Olwig has allowed Mitchell Akiyama and Édith-Anne Pageot to historicize the concept within their respective studies of soundscape and of projects involving the digital and the biotechnical. Olwig clears away the confusion between nature and landscape (a confusion which persists in common usage, according to Anne Cauquelin), showing that the notion of landscape followed upon the concept of the *polis*, and that this was well before the Renaissance, when it became intimately associated with perspectival painting. In its German roots, landscape is actually defined in relation to a social and spatial reality and to a sovereign state, and is thus intrinsically tied to the idea of an inhabited national territory, the contours of which were defined by a particular set of power relations. For the philosopher Anne Cauquelin, *paysage*, on the other hand, appeared concurrently with the mathematical system of perspective and has always referred to “a constructed equivalent of nature,” a representation upon which the viewer looks from a fixed perspective outside the picture. According to Cauquelin, traditional landscape has been in crisis since the collapse of humanity’s old sense of spatial bearings with such changes as interplanetary space exploration, and more recently, this effect has redoubled with the onset of new media, especially the Internet and the dematerializing force of its “virtual space.”

If Olwig and Cauquelin follow different routes, it is still true that to both, landscape is purely a culturally constructed representation. Édith-Anne Pageot summarizes that the terms “landscape” and “paysage” came over time to mean much the same thing, an optical experience structured by Euclidian space and founded on a unilateral, fixed, and immobile perspective. Thus, nature, which is itself unknowable except through cultural lenses, as Anne Cauquelin points out, became and still is an object of representation: once cast into landscape, nature is to the Western human being a dominated, distant other. The authors of this special issue tend to share that view as they bypass centuries of Western landscape art, much of it nationalistic, in order to explore what has become of the notion of landscape in art. To Suzanne Paquet, landscape is a phenomenon born from urban dwellers’ need for nature. Relying on the work of Vlès, Berdoulay, and Clarimont, as well as Cauquelin, she shows that the contemporary landscaping of urban public spaces in Western cities is really the production of spectacles that respond to what is officially thought to be a need to create exchange value for these cities within the competitive global economy. This excessive dependence on the visual excludes the inhabitants of the city, and Paquet advocates for an art that intervenes to return public spaces to them. Mitchell Akiyama in his article on soundscape also questions the overemphasis placed on the visual in modern and contemporary ways of apprehending the world, of which traditional landscape is one. He proposes that landscape as heard rather than seen opens onto a richer, polysensorial experience of the world. Nathalie Blanc promotes an active aesthetic engagement of citizens with the environment, a judgment of taste based on use; this constitutes a democratizing, value-based experiencing of the world that validates action, and contrasts with the Kantian experience of disinterested contemplation. Édith-Anne Pageot discusses four projects produced for the Internet and requiring digital, electromechanical, and biotech systems that can be envisioned as “new configurations of landscape.” These projects work within an “economy of landscape” only to reformulate its reductive central concepts and to give it new, polysensorial meanings that go well beyond the purely visual. In Tim Collins’ discussion of the major research project he directed recently, he speaks of landscape as an object of analysis and design, but is only interested in it in relation to the larger green infrastructure of a city. Collins’ emphasis is on the need for decisions about public space to be guided by the values of a public that has learned through lived experience to care about this infrastructure. Thus, he remains clear of the whole issue of a fixed-perspective landscape mindset, as does Lora Senechal Carney in her article on an earlier project in which Collins was involved. Finally, Amanda Boetzkes examines the sublime as both an element of the history of landscape and as the visual vocabulary used by Edward

Burtynsky and Jérôme Fortin to reveal this category’s ultimate ecological implications.

The other major theoretical thread in this issue comes largely from the writings of Jacques Rancière and Félix Guattari. The authors who take up this thread (Lora Senechal Carney, Tim Collins, Édith-Anne Pageot) do so not to redefine landscape, but rather to pose questions of politics and ethics in relation to collaborative art (notably in this issue, the projects of Natalie Jeremijenko and Tim Collins) and to ecology from the perspective of sustainable development. It is an aesthetic approach that requires a reconfiguration of public space and of subjectivity, even of intersubjectivity. Lora Senechal Carney explores the critical debate provoked by Nicolas Bourriaud’s book *Relational Aesthetics*. Bourriaud claims that certain contemporary artists, working within the interstices of capitalism, create microtopias, “models of sociability” that enable social exchange outside of the confines of capitalist consumption. This work is clearly distinct from utopian activism, an ineffective practice now largely shorn of its glory, as Édith-Anne Pageot notes. However, Bourriaud’s work has clear limits, and Carney, Collins, and Pageot endorse the ideas that certain artistic practices can contribute to the creation of real communities of exchange and debate, and that these work toward the redefining of subjectivity. This is precisely where issues of politics and ethics come in, and where the theoretical formulations of Rancière and Guattari are put to use by Carney and Pageot. It is well known that Guattari’s thought depends very much on regarding subjectivity as a thing shaped through interpersonal relations, and within particular socio-economic, cultural, and natural environments. In the age of globalized computer systems, Guattari looks toward subjectivities that are capable of avoiding the homogeneity and the consumerist perspective of subject formation within capitalism and of grasping new technologies and scientific advance to make them responsive to diverse human problems, especially ecological challenges. From this perspective, Carney, Collins, and Pageot put forward the idea that certain collaborative artistic practices constitute landmarks in the reinvention of subjectivity. In each of the projects studied here, this reinvention appears to depend on the existence of a discursive community based in common cause rather than in geography or common history. This discursive community undermines dominant capitalist and scientific discourses and thus takes on a political dimension, in Rancière’s sense of the political: that is to say, it constructs a space in which everyone may be heard, leading toward a democratic redistribution of power.

Just as all the authors in this collection bypass traditional Western notions of landscape in pursuit of their particular social, political, and ethical objectives, they also offer new ways of thinking about art’s contemporary roles in cultural spaces

and in relation to ecological imperatives. New concepts of public space develop through this process. Nathalie Blanc emphasizes the need to take seriously the aesthetic experience of public spaces, by which she means a creative engagement, not just of professionals, but of everyone. Similarly, Suzanne Paquet's critique of officially produced, landscaped urban tableaux goes on to envision public spaces re-appropriated for the public through artistic intervention. Tim Collins' work as a public artist is based on improving the ecological function of urban spaces through combinations of professional research and public dialogue, teaching people to appreciate the ecological and aesthetic value of these spaces. Lora Senechal Carney, using a narrative of a transdisciplinary collaborative project as a case history, works toward the discovery of a theoretical and critical model that supports ecological recovery through collaborative artistic intervention in public spaces. Édith-Anne Pageot focuses on the shifts in perspective and the possibilities introduced at the frontiers of public space through the cultural spaces created by the Internet and biotechnology. Amanda Boetzkes finds in the strategies of two artists a "release from the constrictions of anthropocentric discourse," which raises the possibility of a completely new way of thinking about nature, freed of notions of landscape. To Mitchell Akiyama the work of soundscape composers involves an aural construction of place as an alternative to the overbearing visuality of the modern world, and soundscape compositions, through their attention to the

specific values intrinsic to a place, automatically raise concerns about its environmental health.

New aesthetic paradigms are articulated in the discussions presented by these authors. Putting traditional, authoritarian Western concepts of landscape firmly in the past, and even, in Suzanne Paquet's case, suggesting that the whole notion of landscape ought to be erased from art, the authors find ways to begin to accommodate the political and ethical consequences of contemporary ecological crises and their implications for art. They discover strategies through which artists who intervene in public space and the representations of these spaces have produced new formulations for positive change. New roles for art are clarified: Tim Collins declares, for instance, that "while replicable fact is the domain of science, human perception and value are the domains of art and the humanities," and art belongs among the diverse fields that must now work together to solve real-world ecological problems. The "visual turn" in modernity is replaced by insistence on multisensory engagement with cultural spaces and on the validation of lived experience, which is the basis for bridging the social divide. The new paradigms also move beyond the modernist desire for virginal nature that is so clearly linked to primitivism, to a longing for escape, and to attachment to nationalistic identities sustained by contact with nature as an untamed Other. Such a move beyond desire allows for direct confrontation with contemporary ecological conditions.