

Report on the book *Landscape Theory*
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This brief paper is a report on a book that I edited with Rachael DeLue, an art historian at Princeton University. The book is called *Landscape Theory*, and it is the penultimate volume in a series of seven books called *The Art Seminar*. (New York: Routledge, 2005-2008.) Each book in the series addresses a different problem in art theory. Volume I was *Art History versus Aesthetics*, about the long-standing misunderstandings between art historians and those – including philosophers – who appreciate art for its aesthetics.

Books in the series *The Art Seminar* have an unusual structure: they begin with an Introduction (Rachael wrote the one for *Landscape Theory*), and then they present a long transcription of a conversation between specialists. The conversations are held over the course of a day, in a special meeting: no papers are read, and no one can apply to join. The panelists are invited, and asked to read papers in advance. We meet for a day just to get to know one another, and then we meet for five hours in front of an audience and talk; the conversation is taped, transcribed, and very elaborately edited (the panelists are encouraged to rewrite everything, and to add footnotes). Then the transcript is sent out to forty people who did not attend the event. Those people are asked to write assessments of the discussion; they can write at any length, from 1/2 page to 50 pages, and they can write in any style. Their contributions are not edited at all: we accept everything that is sent. Then the Introduction, transcription, and the 40 assessments (sometimes fewer) are sent to two people who write Afterwords. Their job is to sum everything up.

The idea of *The Art Seminar* series is to produce a new kind of art theory: one that is open-ended, inconclusive, combative, and as diverse as we can possibly make it. My idea was to move away from the kind of art theory that has been practiced since the 1960s, in which the contributors are all more or less agreed on the basic terms of interpretation, and all that remains is to investigate particular problems in an increasingly formulaic manner. *The Art Seminar* works completely differently: each book in the series is evidence of how divergent art theories have become, and how little people actually agree.

Different volumes evince different degrees of incoherence. In volume I, the art historians and aestheticians just cannot agree. Volume 2 is called *Photography Theory*, and it shows that contemporary theorizing on photography is even more of a mess. In that book, Rosalind Krauss argues with several people about the semiotics of photography. Fair enough: that argument has been going on for several decades. What hasn't been seen, I think, is the fact that for many people, the argument about photography's semiotics is not only inconclusive but beside the point: it is, in short, *boring*. Many of the people who wrote assessments for that book decided to completely ignore the debate. Photography theory is at an impasse, not only because its fundamental terms are debated, but because they are *not* debated, or even recognized as *fundamental terms*. Other books in the series have different *kinds of confusion or incoherence*, and I hope that *The Art Seminar* series will be able to demonstrate several distinct species of incoherence.

I mention all this to set the stage for *Landscape Theory*, which has its own forms of incoherence. To begin, the panel that Rachael and I assembled was unusually diverse.

Rachael and I are art historians, and we also had Michael Gaudio (another art historian; Rachael and Michael work on nineteenth-century landscape painting). Our most famous panelist was Denis Cosgrove, who started the discipline of Geography in its modern sense in the U.K. Then there was Michael Newman, a colleague of mine in Chicago, who was educated in Leuven and writes on contemporary film and video art. He has just completed books on James Coleman and Jeff Wall. Another panelist was Jessica Dubow, who studied Geography at Sheffield with Denis Cosgrove; now she does literary criticism and writes on people like William Kentridge. We had a landscape architect, Michael Hays; a Danish historian of landscape, Jacob Wamberg; a Finnish historian of Chinese landscape painting, Minna Törmä; and a landscape design historian, Anne Whiston Spirn, who teaches at MIT in Boston. And finally, we had a popular author, a non-academic, Rebecca Solnit. (A number of her books appear on amazon.de.)

It was, in other words, a very diverse group. For some (Cosgrove, Dubow) landscape is fundamentally a political category. For others (Wamberg) it is a philosophic category. For still others (Gaudio, DeLue, Newman) it is a form of art, mainly painting. The book is being completed now – the people writing the Afterwords are about to send them in – and by summer 2008 the book should be out. We hope it will be the most wide-ranging meditation on what landscape means, both in life and in art.

In this essay, I have arranged the unsolved problems of the book into thirteen categories. I should say these categories are not in the book! They are my own attempt to bring some order to the *kinds of confusion* that seem to pertain to theorizing on landscape.

I. Arguably the principal issue is this: is *landscape* primarily an ideological category? There are several ways of arguing that it is. In his book *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Denis Cosgrove writes that landscape is “a way in which some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world about them and their relationships with it, and through which they have commented on social relations.” W.J.T. (Tom) Mitchell, the widely-read theorist of visual studies, has also written on landscape; at one point he says landscape “is the dreamwork of imperialism,” alluding to Walter Benjamin, and taking landscape decisively away from a purely aesthetic interpretation. There is good historical reason to want to think of landscape as an ideological category. Historically, the identification of landscape with ideology, which began in earnest in the 1960s, was a reaction against (1) nineteenth-century ideas about spiritual, aesthetic, romantic responses to nature, and (2) the idea of landscape as a “product of natural forces,” as Cosgrove says in *Landscape Theory*.

At the beginning of our panel discussion, we quickly agreed that landscape is not *only* ideological. But that led us immediately into a wonderful confusion. What is landscape, *aside from* ideology? Michael Gaudio said he thought it might be landscape “itself,” in the process of its making. Following Maunu Häyrynen, Cosgrove said the non-ideological or extra-ideological in landscape might be the “everyday experience of landscape,” for example a farmer’s experience. (When I spoke about this in Richard Schindler’s conference in Freiburg, I put a slide of Heidegger’s *Hütte* onscreen. The *Hütte* is close to the university, and I thought that speaking of authentic, grounded experiences in the land required an allusion to Heidegger. Needless to say, Heidegger’s name did not come up in our panel discussion.) Anne Whiston Spirn had a different idea: she nominated “experiences of partnership with the land” and its “physical shaping,” and she noted that “land means both the physical features of a place and its

population. *Skabe* and *schaffen* mean ‘to shape,’ and are related to association, partnership.” David Hays thought the non-ideological might be something outside of vision. “When people define landscape,” he said, “they usually take *-scape* as *-scope*, as if it pertained to vision. But it does not.” In Freiburg, I mentioned the work of a young scholar, Philipp Felsch, currently (as of 2007-8) working in the Eikones project (NCCR-Iconic Criticism) in Basel. Felsch is studying maps of the Polar regions, and he finds that they were often spoken of as if they were inherently unrepresentable.

2. Of course the elephant in the room was aesthetics: it would have been the most obvious idea to nominate as something extra-ideological, but that might have seemed too easy, or too old-fashioned, or—more probably—too ideologically tainted. A second question might then be: isn’t landscape fundamentally or inescapably an aesthetic category?

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it was often natural to speak of landscape as an aesthetic category, and even as late as 1963 Joachim Ritter argued for landscape as the aesthetic category *par excellence*. But I suspect our panelists were thinking of critiques by Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida, and others, which have it that every aesthetics is also a politics, and therefore that aesthetic categories are not instances of things outside of ideology. Or—to put it in a more historically nuanced fashion—an appeal to aesthetics would be an appeal to a specific ideological construction, prevalent from the eighteenth century to the present, but also clearly constrained by an often willful blindness to its own politics. So aesthetics was not raised as an example of what it is in landscape that is outside ideology: but aesthetic’s absence left us with a very intriguing confusion—one that led, at moment, perilously close to Heidegger’s sense of peasant authenticity.

3. (Note: these questions roughly follow the order of conversation in the book. After the first two, which I think remain fundamental, they are not arranged in order of importance.) A third problem, then, concerns the use of the word *space*. What part is played by the word *space* in conceptualizations of landscape? The difficulty here is that *space*, *spatium*, and other cognate words in European languages do not stand for transcultural categories. In *Is Art History Global?*, volume 2 of *The Art Seminar*, there is a long discussion of the inappropriateness of using “space” to talk about art before the 18th century, or outside the West. I think it was Peter Collins who made the seminal observation that the word “space” does not occur in architectural treatises before the 18th century. In the later 20th century, in the wake of phenomenology, a number of writers found the Kantian sense of space too narrow: but is the problem of the modern, European origins of an interest in *space* adequately addressed by bringing in Lefebvre’s spaces, Panofsky’s “psychophysiological” space, or non-Euclidean spaces? The general consensus in *Is Art History Global?* was that *space* is a malleable concept, but that it might not pertain as well to non-Western art. In terms of landscape theory, it should give pause for thought that *space* remains a fundamental, ubiquitous term in the description of real and represented landscapes.

4. After space, time. How is temporality represented in landscape? Like the question of the uses of *space*, this is a question that ramifies into many areas of art historical research, and into accounts of the experience of real landscapes. It seems from the texts and conversation in *Landscape Theory* that the field is structured by two sometimes opposing ideas. On the one hand, time is inserted into landscape, or embedded in it, in particular by the representation of work or leisure. In the West, this

begins after the middle ages; the Lorenzetti frescoes in Siena are the usual example. On the other hand, time is evacuated from landscape by the representation of stasis. This is part of Joseph Koerner's argument in relation to eschatological paintings; and he has argued it in relation to Romantic paintings like Friedrich's. These two poles might be useful in conceptualizing the many different instances of time in painting: I know this is a vertiginous level of abstraction and generalization, but it might help in giving some preliminary order to a field that is, at the moment, on the verge of an unhelpful empiricism.

5. What are the meanings of landscape without human presence? We discussed this from several vantage points. First, the idea that landscape without figures is "pure," "meaningless," or alternately "non-narrative" can be assigned to Creighton Gilbert, whose essay "Landscape as Not-Subject" remains interesting as an example of a modernist interpretation of the genesis of landscape. (Thanks to Koerner and Chris Wood, the scholarship on the origins of landscape painting has become more precise, but Gilbert's essay has a generative abstraction typical of mid-century scholarship.) Second, landscape without figures, at least since romanticism, can express a complex condition of absence or void. This has also been explored by Koerner; at Eikones I ran across some interesting new work by Sylwia Chomentowska. She is exploring the history of abstraction in painting, and making a distinction between *void* and *nothingness*. The former is a condition arrived at by subtraction (for example of figures); the latter I a refusal or negation of representation (as in, for example, Malevich). The two concepts help articulate an ambiguity in the English words *absence* and *void*. (And third, landscape without figures can be suspect, because it does not express the harmony between man and nature: this unexpected viewpoint was articulated by Minna Törmä, the specialist in the Chinese scholar tradition of landscape painting. In China, there are landscapes without figures, and they have sometimes been seen as inadequate expressions of Confucian harmony; but they have also often been employed as allegories of human values and relations.)

6. The next problem that came up was as large as the first, second, third, and fourth: how did representation, subjectivity, and landscape become linked? The conversation took two principal lines of thought: first, they were associated through the idea that the world, after Descartes, has become a picture. This is Heidegger's assertion in "The Age of the World Picture"; and from this perspective, landscape is an exemplary representation of subjectivity. Second, they were linked during the development of capitalism in the Renaissance; this perspective would stress the first topographic views of princely estates in Urbino and in Siena. Landscape would therefore be an exemplary representation of politics: an interesting difference. (Again, another answer came from a China specialist. In *Landscape Theory*, several of the people writing assessments are specialists in Asian art. Martin Powers pointed out that Chinese landscape painting landscape presented itself as an exemplary site for the expression of subjectivity in the 12th c., possibly because social and literary referents are more malleable in landscape than in figure painting or other arts. This may be an apposite place to point out that, in accordance with the structure of art history, these 13 questions remain Western with intermittent interpolations. In other words I do not think that a preponderance of scholars specialized in non-Western art would have substantially altered the conceptual structure of the book. Art history is so thoroughly Western—from its narrative forms and interpretive methods to its departments and conferences—that the non-Western

material *can only* appear as interpolation, interruption, enlargement, addition, but never as foundational conceptualization. But that is the subject for another essay, another book.)

7. The seventh problem that emerged in our conversation was, more or less: Do landscapes represent nature? To this one might answer: No, because *nature* is such a compromised term that the statement, *landscapes represent nature*, could at best be an empty formula. As Bruno Latour says: nature is a “jumble of Greek philosophy, French Cartesianism, and American parks.” But on the other hand, it is not unreasonable to insist on a small measure of optimism. *Nature* may be “the most complex word in the language” (as Raymond Williams has said), but it remains the necessary (although not the only) subject of landscape: this is the gist of an observation made by Anne Whiston Spirn. Perhaps the optimal response would be a guarded “yes and no”: after all, in landscape, “the object of representation is shaped by the representation” (as Kenneth Olwig wrote), in a system of “circulating reference” (in Bruno Latour’s words).

8. Is landscape inextricably tied to the sublime or the beautiful? Certainly, in the history of art, in landscape architecture, and in critical discourse up to the present. In the panel discussion, this viewpoint was articulated by Rachael DeLue, Michael Gaudio, and Michael Hays, among others. But that is the view from art history. From cultural studies, Geography, and cultural politics—represented in the panel discussion by Denis Cosgrove and Jessica Dubow, the sublime is just a critical term among others, which can be assigned to a particular configuration of the bourgeoisie. That argument is made at length in Peter DeBolla’s book on the sublime. As Häyrynen has written, “replacing the politics of landscape by poetics” would limit its ability to speak about the “everyday.”

9. Can landscape be imagined *outside* of painting, photography and film? In the panel discussion, Rebecca Solnit argued this by adducing examples of artists who had represented Yosemite in ways very different from the canonical representations by Ansel Adams, Eadweard Muybridge, and earlier photographers. She mentioned Chiura Obata, and she noted that tourists do not take photographs that are like Adams’s. I argued against that, saying that every picture I’ve ever seen of Yosemite descends, at some distance, from Adams and other canonical photographers, and even though tourists aren’t often trying to make art photography, they end up making pictures that can be assigned to genealogies that lead back to Adams. I do not think we can imagine landscape outside of painting, photography, and film.

10. Is landscape, as representation, always framed? This question goes to the heart of what we mean by *representation* in this case. One might say the answer is no. Michael Newman adduced Michael Snow’s *La région centrale*, a film made with a special camera that rotated 360° and made a “frameless” representation of landscape. (Against that it might be said that when the film is shown, it is framed.) Jacob Wamberg said he thought that cave paintings show that landscape representations do not need to be framed; but that observation got him in some trouble, because the remainder of the panel wanted to say that cave paintings are not yet *landscape* or even *paintings*. (I have recently come across an essay by Gottfried Boehm, which asks whether landscape must always have a horizon: it’s a parallel question, and possibly a good complement to the question of the frame.)

11. Eleventh problem: is a landscape a place, a view of a place, or both? Anne Wpirn and Michael Hays both argued that landscape is misinterpreted a view, and that it is more *place* than *view of a place*. The art historical take on this is different, because of

the preponderance of critical terms like *prospect*, *aspect*, and *perspective*. The geographer Ti Fu Yuan calls landscape a “diaphor,” meaning it combines “domain” and “scenery.” Kenneth Olwig says landscape is both a “region” and a “picture, and as evidence he cites Dr. Johnson’s famous English *Dictionary* of 1755. My own take on this is that the ambiguity is inbuilt, but that it does not help to bring in the rare word “diaphor”: the ambiguity, as William Empson would have said, can be classified without the extra terminology.

12. Is landscape painting (and photography) dead? Here’s a question of pressing interest to any number of contemporary painters and photographers. The “serious” answer is yes, it is dead: it was last a viable art form at the end of the 18th century (as Tom Mitchell has argued). Denis Cosgrove has put the death of landscape painting at various points from the 19th to the late 20th century, but his formula “landscape as an active concern for progressive art died in the second half of the 19th century” captures the principal idea. A “serious” historical and critical consideration has to count landscape painting and photography as among the *passé* or *recherché* genres, if only because the issue now, or at least after minimalism, is whether or not painting itself is dead.

(An interruption in the twelfth problem: several authors in the book also wonder when landscape painting began in the West. Here are five answers, most culled from the book: (1) since Altdorfer (much of this would depend on Joseph Koerner’s observations); (2) since Giorgione (Creighton Gilbert’s argument; see Problem 5); (3) since the 19th century (this is the answer that is implicit in most freshman-level textbooks on art history, for example Helen Gardner’s or Horst Janso’s); (4) since Greece and Rome, which were *paysagère* because poets and geographers “relied on optics” (this is Michel Baridon’s opinion); (5) since prehistory, because a historical progression links prehistoric “landscapes” to the present (this is Jacob Wamberg’s Hegelian argument about the development of landscape).)

Back to the twelfth problem. It could also be said that landscape painting is not dead because it is practiced in many different contexts. For example: (1) the many species of current landscape art, from Laura Owens and Howard Hodgkin to Andreas Gursky and Mark Dion; (2) the many species of Hollywood landscapes, from *Star Wars* to video games, fantasy art, and science fiction painting (these outnumber fine-art landscape painting many times over, even though academics continue to study mainly fine art); (3) the many serious, committed, widespread communities of post-impressionist schools, and “starving artists,” who make legions of hotel paintings and tourist paintings (and again, this category vastly outnumbers fine-art landscape painting and photography). So statistically, sociologically, landscape painting and photography is far from dead. But “seriously,” it is long dead.

13. The final problem is raised by Jill Casid, in her assessment of the panel discussion. She points out that our conversation is “audibly quiet” on the “complex and vexed relations” between human beings and land. *Landscape Theory*, she says, doesn’t account for “movement, alienation, and displacement,” the “diversity of places” in the contemporary world, and “the hybridity of place”; and she cites Edward Soja and Homi Bhabha, among others. This raises the very real possibility that the group Rachael DeLue and I gathered were practicing a sometimes aestheticized, sometimes under-politicized form of landscape theory. (I imagine Denis Cosgrove and Jessica Dubow would have

energetically disagreed; but the way the book is put together, they will not see Casid's assessment until the book is published.)

What can be concluded from these thirteen points of disagreement or ambiguity? For myself, I find landscape is the second-most incoherent concept in art theory: the most incoherent, perhaps, is *the body*. The incoherence of *landscape* and *the body* are similar, because both are understood as exemplary mixtures of the conceptual and the somatic, and in that sense they are both entangled in our entanglement in phenomenology—the philosophic doctrine that I would argue forms much of our conceptual horizon. *Landscape Theory* provides several pieces of indirect evidence that our conceptual entanglement in phenomenology—our inability to form a conceptualization of art and representation outside of it—is what generates the particular indeterminateness of the discussions and assessments in *Landscape Theory*. A first piece of indirect evidence would be Jerome Silbergeld's assessment. He is another specialist in Chinese art, and he says—quite simply—that the literature on landscape in the Chinese tradition is much more compact, less sprawling and open-ended, than the literature to which we were responding. Something in the Western tradition makes *landscape* the source of a generative confusion. A second kind of indirect evidence is the way that some scholars announce that they will write “in a pictorial mode,” “by painting” or “sketching” their answers, or by “wandering” through the problem. (I won't name all the authors who say this, but Rebecca Solnit and Tom Mitchell have both made use of such metaphors, and so have I: they are curiously tempting when the subject is landscape.)

And this brings me to my own contribution, which is reprinted in *Landscape Theory*: an essay on how scholars tend to become meditative, wandery, and maybe a little sleepy when it comes to writing about landscape. (The essay is reprinted in my *Our Beautiful Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing*.) Landscape theory and landscape representation are like sugar: they are sweet leftovers of the romantic tradition. In small doses they are energizing, but in larger quantities they are overwhelming... so that some scholars begin to drift when they write about landscape, and they fall, slightly, into a reverie, something like bemusement or sleep. I take that phenomenon as another sign that when it comes to theorizing about landscape, something is at work on our conceptual acuity: we do not own the subject, it owns us.