

# Limits of Landscape Theory

James Elkins

## Organization of this talk:

A.

Introduction: the book *Landscape Theory*

B.

Thirteen unresolved themes in landscape theory

C.

Conclusion: how the thirteen are related

A.

Introduction: the book  
*Landscape Theory*

The book *Landscape Theory* is volume six in the series *The Art Seminar* (NY: Routledge, 2008). It is co-edited with Rachael DeLue (Princeton).

# The Art Seminar

VOLUME 1  
ART HISTORY VERSUS AESTHETICS

VOLUME 2  
PHOTOGRAPHY THEORY

VOLUME 3  
IS ART HISTORY GLOBAL?

VOLUME 4  
THE STATE OF ART CRITICISM

VOLUME 5  
THE RENAISSANCE

VOLUME 6  
LANDSCAPE THEORY

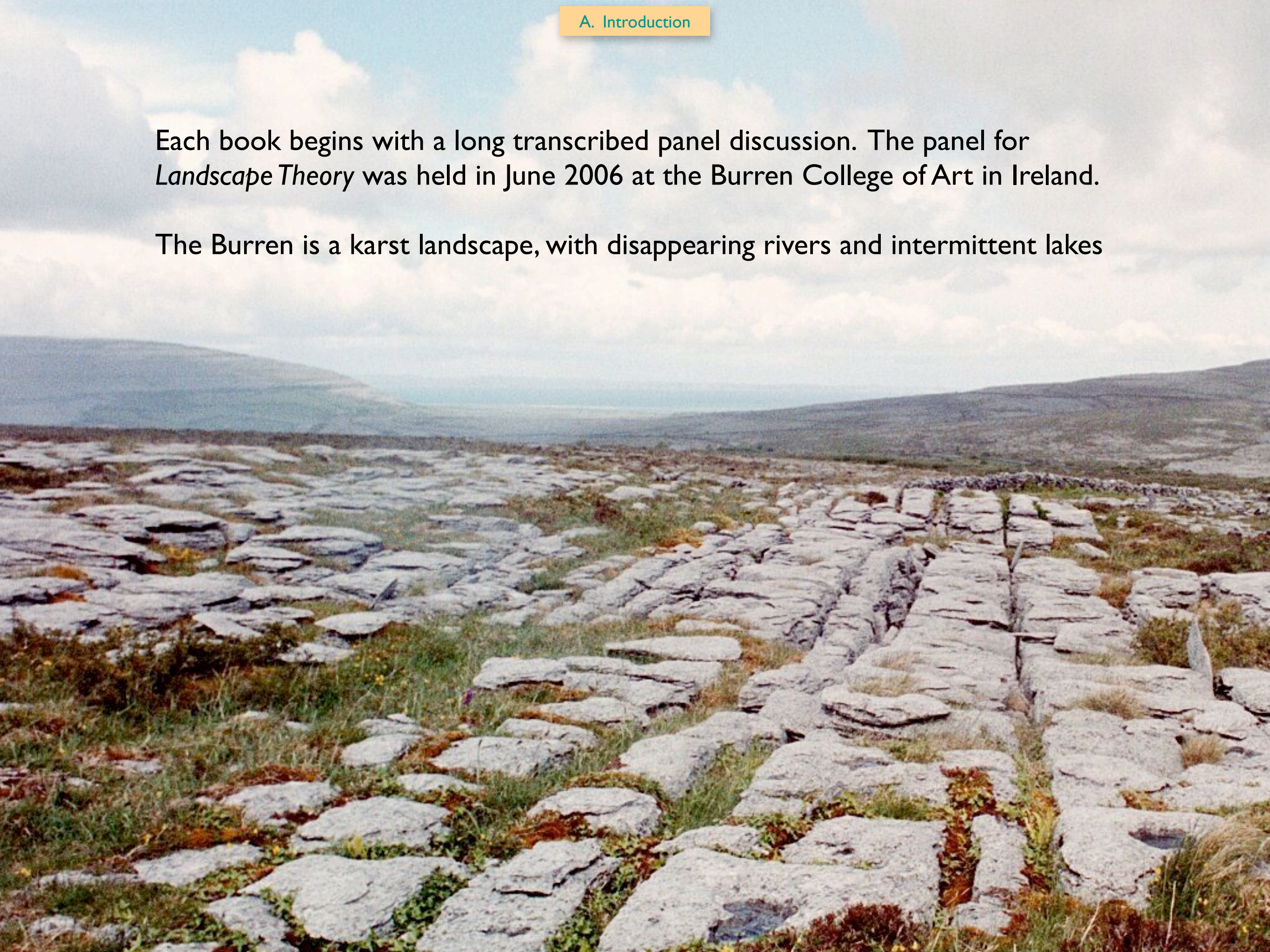
VOLUME 7  
TRANSCENDENCE

Sponsored by the University College Cork, Ireland; the Burren College of Art, Ballyvaughan, Ireland; and the School of the Art Institute, Chicago.



Each book begins with a long transcribed panel discussion. The panel for *Landscape Theory* was held in June 2006 at the Burren College of Art in Ireland.

The Burren is a karst landscape, with disappearing rivers and intermittent lakes







(It's a lovely place. Visit if you can!)

Each volume in the *Art Seminar* series has the same structure:

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“Elusive Landscapes and Shifting Grounds”

*Rachael DeLue*

### SECTION 2 STARTING POINTS

“*Introduction to Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*”

*Denis Cosgrove*

““One With Nature”: Landscape, Language, Empathy, and Imagination”

*Anne Whiston Spirn*

“Writing Moods”

*James Elkins*

### SECTION 3 THE ART SEMINAR

Participants: Denis Cosgrove, Rachael DeLue, Jessica Dubow, James Elkins, Michael Gaudio, David Hays, Róisín Kennedy, Michael Newman, Rebecca Solnit, Anne Whiston Spirn, Minna Törmä, Jacob Wamberg



## SECTION 4 ASSESSMENTS

Kenneth R. Olwig  
Maunu Häyrynen  
Jill Casid  
Dianne Harris  
Jennifer Jane Marshall  
Robin Kelsey  
Malcolm Andrews  
Blaise Drummond  
Hanna Johansson  
Annika Waenerberg  
Stephen Daniels  
Dana Leibsohn  
Yvonne Scott  
Martin Powers  
Jerome Silbergeld  
Michel Baridon  
David E. Nye  
Robert R. Riley

## SECTION 5 AFTERWORDS

“[title TBA]”  
*Allan Wallach*  
“Blindness and Insights”  
*Elizabeth Helsing*

B.  
Thirteen unresolved  
themes in landscape  
theory



First (and principal) problem: is “landscape” an ideological category?

1. Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*: 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.”

2. Tom Mitchell: “Landscape is the dreamwork of imperialism.”

Historically, the identification of landscape with ideology was a reaction against (1) nineteenth-century ideas about spiritual, aesthetic, romantic responses to nature, and (2) the idea of landscape as “product of natural forces” (Cosgrove)



If landscape isn't to be identified with ideology, then what, exactly, is “non-ideological” in the concept?

1. Landscape “in itself”? The process of its making? (Michael Gaudio)

2. The “everyday experience of landscape,” for example a farmer's experience? (Denis Cosgrove, Maunu Häyrynen)

3. Experiences of partnership with the land and its “physical shaping”? “Land means both the physical features of a place and its population. *Skabe* and *schaffen* mean ‘to shape,’ and are related to association, partnership.” (Anne Whiston Spirn)



(continued)

4. Something outside of vision? (“When people define landscape, they usually take *-scape* as *-scope*, as if it pertained to vision. But it does not.”) (David Hays)

5. Whatever is unrepresentable? So that representation is to be equated with ideology? (In polar exploration, the arctic regions were thought to be unrepresentable—Philipp Felsch, *Eikones*)

6. The aesthetic?...



Second problem: is landscape fundamentally (inescapably, partly) an aesthetic category?

Joachim Ritter (1963): landscape is the aesthetic experience *par excellence*

Against this is the argument, in Jean-Luc Nancy and elsewhere, that every aesthetics is a politics; this becomes counterintuitive when the discourse assumes landscape has no attraction but politics (we all had a lovely time in the Burren; I broke my toe)



Third problem: what part is played by the word *space* in conceptualizations of landscape?

*Space, spatium*, etc., are not 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

The Kantian sense of space is too narrow, but is the problem adequately addressed by bringing in Lefebvre’s spaces, Panofsky’s psychophysiological space, non-Euclidean spaces, etc. etc.?



Fourth problem: how is landscape related to temporality?

1. Time is inserted into landscape, or embedded in it, by the representation of work or leisure (after the middle ages; the Lorenzetti frescoes in Siena are the usual example)

2. Time is evacuated from landscape by the representation of stasis (Joseph Koerner's argument in relation to eschatological paintings; and in relation to Romantic paintings like Friedrich's)



Fifth problem: what are the meanings of landscape without human presence?

1. Landscape without figures is “pure,” or “meaningless,” or alternately “non-narrative” (Creighton Gilbert, “Landscape as Not-Subject”)

2. Landscape without figures, at least since romanticism, can express a complex condition of absence or void (Koerner, Sylwia Chomentowska, *Eikones*)

3. Landscape without figures is suspect, because it does not express the harmony between man and nature (in some Chinese scholar-tradition painting; Minna Törmä)



Sixth problem: how did representation, subjectivity, and landscape become linked?

1. Via the idea that the world becomes a picture after Descartes (Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture”). Landscape is therefore an exemplary representation of subjectivity.

2. Via the development of capitalism in the Renaissance, and the first topographic views of princely estates (in Urbino, in Siena). Landscape is therefore an exemplary representation of politics, but marginal as subjectivity.