

Landscape

Subjects: Art

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“Landscape” is a broad and slippery term, with strong connections to the history of art, the history of territorial possession, and the cultural artifacts of human occupation in specific places.

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1. Introduction

The ambiguity of the term “Landscape” stems, landscape historian Marina Moskowitz explains, from the very derivation of the word “an amalgam of the Dutch landshcap, the German landschaft and the Old English landskipe: the first connoted a scene, often in a painting or other framed image; the second referred to a bounded area and the visible physical elements of which it was composed; and the third had a more social meaning, encompassing the community associated with a given place” ^[1].

Landscape historians and cultural landscape theorists agree that “landscape” is not synonymous with “nature” ^[2]. Rather, it is the close entwining of human and biological life that is at the centre of most landscape histories ^{[3][4]}. Thus, human concerns—priorities, budgets, design decisions, preservation battles, perceived needs and benefits—tend to obscure the actual, non-human lives that also comprise landscapes. At times, the emphasis in landscape studies on human agency and needs can obscure the complex relationships between non-human living things and their animate and inanimate contexts ^{[5][6][7][8][9]}. Landscapes such as public parks, gardens, and conservation areas continue to prioritize an anthropocentric outlook. Diverse authors have pointed out that this anthropocentric outlook is problematic, destructive, and neo-colonial ^{[10][11][12][13]}. Climate change activists, environmentally-minded artists, and ecologically-sensitive landscape designers are thus in a tricky position. How might it be possible to approach a landscape, i.e., land itself, and all that lives on it, in a way that foregrounds the realities and risks of that site, without falling back on familiar humanistic and anthropocentric tropes? This is a problem for the art historian as well, especially as very little has been published on the eco-didactic phenomenon in the arts and design ^[14].

Landscapes designed or preserved for the benefit, continuance, or recognition of specific ecologies might offer some insights.

2. Glacier, Plaza, and Garden: Ecological Collaboration and Didacticism in Three Canadian Landscapes

Didacticism in art has had a rough road over the last fifty to one hundred years. Negatively associated with an annoying, moralizing, and finger-wagging self-righteousness, didacticism has been all but banned from the realm of art, both on the grounds of epistemic vice and on the grounds that art that engages with the material realities and injustices of the world is intrinsically lacking. This attitude is, however, one that only the most privileged can afford to hold. As climate change intensifies, the number of species plummets, and calls for action increase, is it still—was it ever?—valuable to insist that art, in order to be “true” art, should turn away from injustice and avoidable tragedy? The three creative projects presented in this essay range dramatically in scope, form, and intention. Yet the engine driving all three is concern for a specific landscape. In the case of *Requiem for a Glacier*, through a dramatic creative gesture, the artwork aims to draw attention to the vulnerability of a vast, sacred, and ecologically irreplaceable landscape in western Canada. In the tiny *Urban Prairie*, landscape architects learned from the biodiversity of Canadian prairie lands, making space for this flora in the context of a major museum setting. By summoning the minute details and hidden, entwined histories of plants, animals, birds, rocks, water, and humans in *The Boreal Poetry Garden*, the artist foregrounds the multifaceted aliveness of this patch of boreal forest.

In all three cases, in addition to the creative and design strategies that were particular to their project and its site, the artists and designers used didactic means in order to communicate their priorities and concerns. In all cases there was a

“didactic” or ulterior motive present. In *Requiem for a Glacier*, even if the artwork seemed to lament an inevitable death, its intention was to protest the fate of a landscape whose future was then in the hands of Canadian courts. And if the *Urban Prairie* underscores a visual discourse on a unified and thus fictional Canada, it nonetheless makes a didactic intervention in a windswept and unwelcoming plaza, bringing plant life and essential insect life into a terrain that had previously been unwelcoming to both. The *Boreal Poetry Garden* is both the most subtle and, I argue, powerful of all three works in terms of eco-didacticism, in that it brings the audience for the art into the actual and virtual heart of the forest that is the artist Marlene Creates’s concern, teaching by example how to love and respect a landscape without extracting any element of its complex ecosystem. In this way, Creates’s project summons a second meaning of the term, “ulterior”: beyond what is immediate or present, or coming in the future. For while Creates’s poems, walks, photographs, and daily attentiveness to this small corner of Newfoundland forest are fully responsive to the past and the present, they are also committed to the future of this landscape as one that will not succumb to human consumption and ignorance. It is perhaps not possible to create works of art about landscapes that are free of the anthropocentrism that infuses virtually all of the landscape tradition. But Creates’s work suggests that there is a way to make art about landscape that shares the space of representation with the vitality of the landscape itself, placing the landscape first. In order to do that, Creates explains, “I think we need to realize that we actually are part of nature. And maybe if we realized that, we would be better members of the Earth” ^[15].

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