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Things that Matter

Shaping Landscape Agency in the Anthropocene

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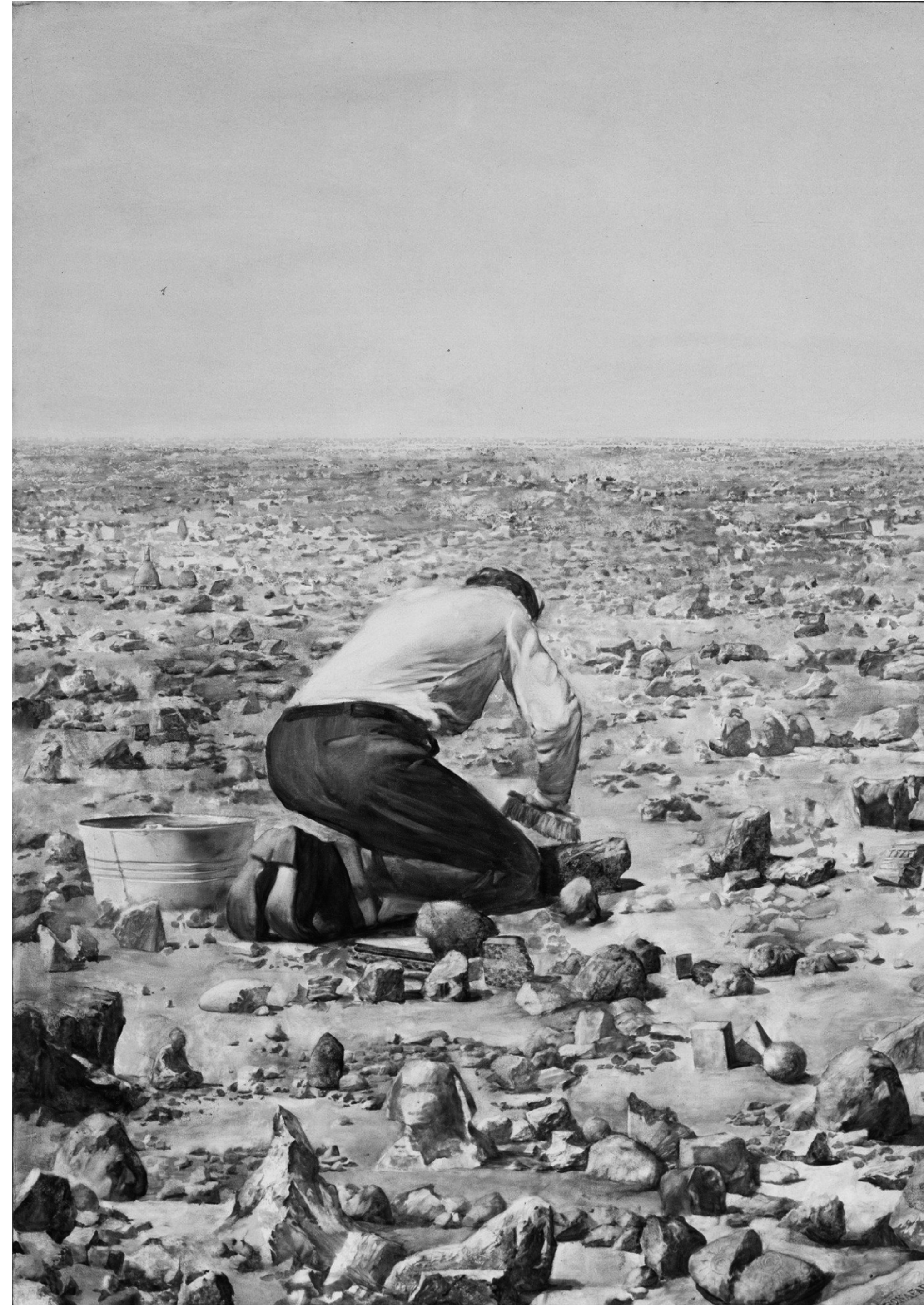

Divisive landscapes

Straddling diverging tectonic plates, Iceland is tearing apart at a rate of 25 centimetres per century. For nearly a thousand years, annual parliamentary meetings were held amidst this dynamically fissuring landscape.[1] Roughly translating as *assembly field*, the ancient site of *Þingvellir* (Thingvellir) drew Icelanders from across the island for a week to discuss communal matters of concern. The distinctive geomorphic features of the setting supported these activities with an assortment of natural hollows and meadows. Here, the shape of the land influenced cultural practices, with *divisive* matters of concern discussed in a literally *dividing* landscape.

While Þingvellir is the most famous example, landscape parliaments were commonplace throughout Viking territory. As an outdoor venue for discussing important community matters, the Nordic *Þing* (*Thing, assembly*) derives from the ancient Germanic proto-parliamentary *Ding*. As Martin Heidegger observed, this semantic legacy is also retained in the English word *thing*, in the sense that a person "knows his things"; that is, "he understands the matters" at hand.[2]

The landscape of things: Almannagjá gorge at Þingvellir, Iceland. Image by Karl Kullmann.

But even as Þingvellir's parliament continued to flourish within the uniquely isolated and dynamic landscape of Iceland, "things" were radically transforming in Continental Europe. With the rise of the centralized state and the application of modern cartography, land enclosure eroded the feudal commons that Thing parliaments typically occupied. With no place left in the landscape, Things moved undercover and eventually into fully enclosed buildings.

Reifying things

As Kenneth Olwig masterfully unpacks, a fundamental transformation occurred for both *landscape* and *things*. Where *things* once pertained to landscape-based community assemblies for discussing *things-that-matter*, the architecturalization of these forums dispossessed Things of their landscape agency. Without agency, things became reified as physical objects, or *things-as-matter*.[3] Notwithstanding Heidegger's etymological lesson with regards to "knowing one's things", this is primarily how we conceive of *things* today—as myriad inanimate and unnamed objects that encircle us with our own indifference.

Landscape also underwent reification. Landscape constituted as a community established through the discussion of *things-that-matter* transformed into landscape as a spatial aggregation of material *things-as-matter*.[4] No longer defined from its communal core as a place, the reified landscape became defined more in terms of spatial boundaries for the containment of material things. Fences, walls, and the power of pictorial framing shaped this containment. As the focus shifted from substance to scenery, landscape became more of a witness to things than the Thing itself.

Contemporary things

Today, even as we submit to a hyper-connected borderless world in which humans and capital move without friction, the landscape is witness to more walls and divisions than ever before.[5] Landscape becomes a scapegoat for the disjunction between the satellite's view of a seamless sphere of mass air travel, instant communications and intercontinental missiles, and the individual's view from the ground where the structures of power are concealed behind closed doors. As the ultimate emblem of ambivalence, things in this reality are relegated to hyper-networked everyday devices within the increasingly expedient Internet of Things.

How might the *thingness* of the landscape be retrieved from here? It would be naïve to suppose that we could turn back time and repatriate the tools of governance back out into the windswept landscape as a kind of recreated Þingvellir. Nor is there any value in physically reconstituting the contemporary *landscape-thing* as a clichéd local amphitheatre that gathers dust as an empty monument to nostalgia for community gatherings of yore. Since the very nature of gathering has changed, how might the landscape-thing re-emerge to help shape contemporary matters of concern? And what *shape* might the landscape-thing take?

Fluid geographies: The Öxará River intercepting the Þingvellir Fissure Swarm. Image by Karl Kullmann.

Geological agents

In essence, these are questions of *agency*, which has been challenging ground for landscape architecture. On the one hand, humans are "geological agents" who have assumed a dominant role in shaping the landscape and whose activities are conspicuous within the Quaternary geological record (recently popularized as the *Anthropocene*).[6] On the other hand, the human geological agent comes burdened with the moral responsibility for stewarding nature that permeates the history of landscape architecture and environmentalism generally.

In a persuasive rewiring of human agency and stewardship, James Corner leveraged *landscape* agency in the recovery of landscape from a submissive reflection of culture to an active instrument that shapes culture.[7] Privileging process and performance over the landscape traditions of aesthetics and form, ecology and mapping were positioned as key design mechanisms for recovering landscape agency.[8] In co-opting metaphors from a *Thousand Plateaus*, creative mapping claimed to circumvent the determinism that is often levelled at methodological approaches to environmental design.[9]

While the application of Corner's agency of ecology and mapping barely evolved across the past two decades of design praxis, landscape agency remains intensely contested in wider landscape discourse. As the pendulum swings back and forth between alternately emphasising the influence of society and nature, the anthropic hand restrains landscape agency.[10] Even Corner's widely adopted strategies of indeterminacy, emergence, scaffoldings, and creative mapping—which aim to divest the traditional master-planner's oversight—ultimately defer to an external human designer to pull the levers of selectivity that set these processes in motion.[11]

Assembling things

Set within the existential ecological crises of the Anthropocene, Bruno Latour extends agency beyond humans and the landscapes that they instigate. No longer external entities awaiting human activation, *non-human objects* become as empowered to instigate actions as their human counterparts. By emphasizing their interconnections, humans and non-human actors are situated symmetrically, with actions arising from their collective pursuits.[12]

Latour applies these symmetrical actor-networks to an object-oriented politics encompassing the many issues to which humans are connected. Typically overlooked as *"matters-of-fact"* that are incidental to political forums, objects are recast as *"matters-of-concern"* that are as important as the actual topics that are up for discussion.[13] Following Heidegger, objects are thus assembled as *gatherings*—or *things*—that draw issues together. In support of this politics of things, Latour observes that ancient Things comprised not only people but also were thick with other *thing*s, ranging from garments to structures, cities, and complex technologies to facilitate gathering.

However, Latour concedes that we cannot simply go back to old Things because the "shape" of contemporary assemblies has changed. Clearly, political forums historically moving from landscape to architecture drive this shape-shift. But it is not simply a question of designing larger and more elaborate arenas within which to assemble, since at the end of the day it is our political horizons that are too limited to address the global scope of the Anthropocene.

Inflecting things

Latour calls on designers to find and represent the shape of thing-assemblies in the Anthropocene. Since *scape* is etymologically *shape*, this challenge resonates with landscape architecture.[14] The agency of the land-shape is emphatically illustrated at Þingvellir, where the unique geomorphology nurtured the development of cultural practices. And although the distinctive land-shapes cleaved by dividing tectonic plates are unique to Iceland, elsewhere in the Viking world Things inhabited similarly scoured shapes of post-glacial landscapes. Both geomorphologies create topographies that gather matters-of-concern within their irregular inflections and folds.

Without being deterministic, it is significant that landscape parliaments thrived for far longer in these amorphous Nordic landscapes than in the more typical dendritic landscapes of Continental Europe. The converging flows of dendritic river systems support central control from a maritime or riverine location, with tendrils of power extending up stream into the hinterlands. Here, water becomes an allegory for time that privileges the inexorable flow of Modern progress and the convergence of history.[15] In juxtaposition, the inflections of post-glacial and tectonic-rift terrain invoke a more temporally variable sense of landscape. This temporal variability explicates the privileging of space over time in the chronicling of the Icelandic Sagas across a *thousand years of non-linear history*.[16] Indeed, temporal variability applies to the very idea of landscape, which unlike architecture and the other arts generally precedes and succeeds the landscape architect and their tools.

Although we cannot reverse time in the sense of returning to Ancient Things, we can perceive contemporary things as landscape inflections in place of rigidly enclosed sites. The landscape inflection functions like a semi-permeable threshold, in the sense that it balances openness and enclosure. Too much openness and the landscape-thing is vulnerable to dissipation into the background noise of myriad other things. Too much containment and the landscape-thing risks suffocation from the limitations placed on access and participation. The variable temporality of the landscape-inflection extends matters-of-concern beyond our preoccupation with our own present and immediate futures, which from ecological crises to genetic design, encompass vast and miniscule scales and temporalities.[17]

Drawing things

With regards to the challenge of representing the ambiguous and controversial nature of *matters-of-concern*, Latour cites the limitations of centuries of innovation in visualization techniques and technologies. From perspectival projection to CAD, we have mastered the art of drawing *objects* but remain unable to satisfactorily draw together, approximate or model the complexity of *things*.[18] With ongoing aspirations for communicating the conceptual essence of the nuanced landscape instead of merely simulating its physical attributes, the history of landscape architectural visualization mirrors this representational struggle.[19]

The inadequacy of techniques that represent the shape of things is largely a consequence of things being entangled with myriad other things. With a remit for the locating physical features of the earth's *topos* (place), landscape architecture's go-to medium of topography struggles to permeate this thickened landscape. From high in the sky, the Cartesian/satellite basis of topography fuses things together into a superficial surface that dilutes the distinctive shape of each thing. And as intoxicating as it may be, the capacity to zoom in and out with impunity in Google Earth, GIS or CAD remains an optical illusion; even as the satellite oversees everything from orbit, it overlooks the nuances of the topos.

Cultivating things: the immersed designer as gardener, who is part steward, part experimenter and part participant. Image by Mark Tansey, Robbe-Grillet Cleansing Every Object in Sight, 1981, Oil on canvas with crayon, 182.9 x 183.4 cm, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Warren Brandt, © 2017 Mark Tansey, DIGITAL IMAGE © 2017, The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence.

Novel representation techniques that retain the distinctiveness of interconnected things may draw insight from the archaic mapping practice of *chorography*. The scope of chorography is the local region, where the representation of landscape elements is prioritized over Cartesian precision. In contrast to the aloof gaze of Cartesian mapping, chorography places the mapper within the field of survey, and often within the map itself. Instead of zooming in and out of frictionless Cartesian space, chorographic space stretches and sticks to all the things that coagulate around matters-of-concern. And if the satellite's geostationary orbit came to symbolize the technological apotheosis of Cartesian mapping, the *drone's* wandering eye becomes a technological symbol of thing-chorography, as it permeates things amidst the thickened topo-spheric zone.[20]

Cultivating things

Latour connects *drawing* to its etymological cognate *design*. If *design* is *drawing together*, and if *things* are *gatherings*, *things* are created through *collaborative design*. For Latour, collaborative design is always *re*design in the sense that some issue or problem exists first. And although the value of collaborative design has long been established within landscape architecture, the stakeholders are typically human. In Latour's collective experiment in a public laboratory, all agents—human and nonhuman—shape the process, even if they are not always apparent, included, or willing.[21]

But while the collective experiment is appealing in theory, how non-human collaborators express agency remains ambiguous. Letting non-humans speak invokes a type of animism, whereby animals, plants, rocks, wind express life forces independent of human enablement. The process through which the landscape architect participates within collaborations is also uncertain. When all actors are granted equal status, the role and skills of the designer are ultimately no more substantial than the opinion of a pebble.

Reconceptualising the designer as a type of *gardener* embedded within collective experiments clarifies the role of the landscape architect in things. In one of the most immersive roles a human can undertake in their environment, a gardener digs, cultivates, gathers, propagates, grafts, shapes, amplifies and rearranges things in a garden. As the garden reveals its agency over time, the gardener continually amends and adapts their designs.[22] As a designer-gardener, the landscape architect is part *participant* through deep involvement in the ecological and social processes that shape a particular issue or project. They are part *experimenter* as they balance participation with the need let processes take their course, even without the immediate endorsement of all (human and non-human) actors. And also, part *steward* since the landscape architect is not ignorant or indifferent to many of the potential outcomes that the levers of design may unfurl into the landscape.

Hybridizing things

Latour observes that Things are no longer limited to conventional parliaments but extend to many other hybrid assemblages; supermarkets, financial markets, hospitals, and computer networks become forums for matters-of-concern.[23] Landscape architecture is well versed in hybrid forms since landscape in all its messy complexity is rarely unalloyed to something else. The re-envisioning of landscape as infrastructure is one such assemblage that hybridizes the performance aspects of the working landscape with the cultural landscape of urbanism. A park is no longer an isolated island puncturing the flux of the metropolis, but is hardwired into a larger landscape system, which, like digital infrastructure, may be invisible to the casual observer.

But overall, the designed landscape remains true to type. We know what to expect and how to behave in a pocket park versus a city square versus a wilderness preserve. And although conforming to type maximises legibility, performance, and accountability, it constrains the capacity of landscape to stretch into shapes that cultivate novel gatherings. With the dissolution of clear distinctions between nature and culture in the Anthropocene, a landscape-of-things demands more radical re-compositions of landscape types into novel hybrid assemblages.

Perhaps the semi-permeable threshold that traditionally frames the garden could be hybridized with the contested public realm of the street. In its conventional role as an access and utilities corridor, the street is still occasionally a setting for community participation, in the sense that people who are gathered around a matter-of-concern "take to the streets." The tactically integrated semi-permeable threshold might help focus the mob, which in the US at least, often ends up on the freeway, before dissipating into a haze of capsicum spray and unfulfilled aspirations. It may also achieve nothing of the sort; just like biological hybridization, a hybrid-type may fail to become a landscape-thing. But given that landscape and human actors are both remarkably adept at adapting and adopting sites and subcultures in unforeseen ways, it is bound to become *something*.[24] After all, the landscape always remains present; it *inherently matters*.

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Notes

[1] Richard Beck (1929), "Iceland's Thousand Year Old Parliament", *Scandinavian Studies and Notes* 10 (5): 149–153. Agust Gudmundsson (1987), "Tectonics of the Thingvellir Fissure Swarm, SW Iceland", *Journal of Structural Geology* 9 (1): 61–69.

[2] Martin Heidegger (1971), "The Thing", in Albert Hofstadter (trans) *Poetry Language Thought* (New York: Harper & Row), 161–180. p. 173.

[3] Kenneth R. Olwig (2013), "Heidegger, Latour and the Reification of Things", *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 95 (3): 251–273. p. 256.

[4] Ibid. p. 251.

[5] Refer to Karl Kullmann, (2016), "Route Fittko: Tracing Walter Benjamin's Path of No Return", *Ground Up (Delineations)* 5: 70–75.

[6] Anne Whiston Spirn (1984), *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature And Human Design* (New York: Basic Books), p. 91. Paul J. Crutzen, (2006), "The 'Anthropocene'", in Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (eds) *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene* (Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer), 13–18.

[7] James Corner (1999), "Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice", in James Corner (ed) *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 1–26.

[8] James Corner (1997), "Ecology and Landscape as Agents of Creativity", in George F. Thompson and Frederick R. Steiner (eds) *Ecological Design and Planning* (New York: Wiley), 80–108. James Corner (1999), "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention", in Denis Cosgrove (ed) *Mappings* (Islington UK: Reakton Books), 213–252.

[9] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press).

[10] David N. Livingstone (2010), "Landscapes of Knowledge", in P. Meusburger, D.N. Livingstone and H. Jöns (eds.) *Geographies of Science* (Berlin DE: Springer), 3–22.

[11] Refer to Peter Connolly (2004), "Embracing Openness: Making Landscape Urbanism Landscape Architectural: Part II", in Julian Raxworthy and Jessica Blood (eds) *The Mesh Book: LandscapeInfrastructure* (Melbourne: RMIT Press), 206–225.

[12] Bruno Latour (2005), *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press).

[13] Bruno Latour (2005), "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public", in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), 4–31. p. 9, added emphases.

[14] *Scape* derives from the Dutch suffix *schap*, which like the German suffix *schaft* means *shape*. Casey, Edward S. (2002), *Representing Place: Landscape Painting And Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

[15] Refer to Karl Kullmann (2016), "Concave Worlds, Artificial Horizons: Reframing the Urban Public Garden." *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 37 (1): 15–32.

[16] Here I am co-opting the title of Manuel De Landa (1997), *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books).

[17] Refer to Timothy Morton (2013), *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press).

[18] Bruno Latour (2008), "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)", Keynote lecture for the *Networks of Design* meeting of the Design History Society, Falmouth, Cornwall, 3rd September 2008.

[19] Refer to Karl Kullmann (2014), "Hyper-realism and Loose-reality: the Limitations of Digital Realism and Alternative Principles in Landscape Design Visualization." *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 9 (3): 20–31.

[20] Refer to Karl Kullmann (2017), "The Satellite's Progeny: Digital Chorography in the Age of Drone Vision", *Forty-Five: Journal of Outside Research* 157. http://forty-five.com/papers/157

[21] Bruno Latour (2014), "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene", *New Literary History* 45: 1–18. p. 17. Bruno Latour (2001), "Which Protocol for the New Collective Experiments?", http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/372

[22] Refer to Karl Kullmann (2017), "The Garden of Entangled Paths: Landscape Phenomena at the Albany Bulb Wasteland", *Landscape Review* 17 (1): 58–77.

[23] Bruno Latour (2005), "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik."

[24] Refer to Karl Kullmann (2015), "The Usefulness of Uselessness: Towards a Landscape Framework for Un-activated Urban Public Space", *Architectural Theory Review* 19 (2): 154–173.