DENATURALIZING THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE—Emily Eliza Scott

Landscape outlives history; it surpasses it. Over time—and almost as a function of its earth, its soil—landscape absorbs the events played out on its surface; it inter the marks of past practices as much as it also bears their traces… [L]andscape is ideological insofar as it allows history to decompose.

—Jessica Dubow

In the past two decades, landscape has taken center stage within art and architecture—if for somewhat different reasons and to different ends. In both fields, there seems to be a driving sense that material-environmental conditions are intensifying and becoming less stable, and, moreover, that attention to entanglements between the human and nonhuman might offer one way beyond postmodernism’s hermetic fixation with representation. This essay focuses on contemporary art that reveals the often hidden and often violent social, political, economic, and historical facets of seemingly natural sites in the American landscape. Here land is understood to be neither pregiven—static, neutral, or natural—nor something to which we have unmediated access. Rather, it is approached as an outcome and index of complex procedures. The artworks I will examine open onto questions of power, and, furthermore, the role of visual representation (or a lack thereof) in struggles over space. More precisely, they probe the ways that landscape, when taken as an embodiment or extension of “nature,” has served to sanitize, obscure, and/or naturalize various conflicts, as in cases where differing environmental values collide with regard to the same plot of ground.1

Around Crab Orchard (2012), the first feature-length film by the interdisciplinary artist and writer Sarah Kanouse, explores a specific wildlife refuge in southern Illinois in terms of the way nature imagery has masked highly unsettling activities taking place within its borders. Early on in Kanouse’s sixty-nine-minute piece, archival clips from an official United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) promotional video showcase familiar-looking footage of waterfowl and other wildlife in their presumably native habitat, set to twangy bluegrass and a voice-over that beckons, “Ahhh, peace at last, away from the hustle and bustle of urban life. […] Welcome to Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge, a unique place to experience nature.” Shortly thereafter, we learn that Crab Orchard is simultaneously home to General Dynamics, a multibillion-dollar defense company that produces munitions within the refuge and, in the process, leaves behind dangerous contaminants such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), depleted uranium, and various leads. This wildlife refuge is unique in that it is the only USFWS site where weapons production is still actively ongoing. It is quite typical, however, in having undergone the “military-to-wildlife conversion” process, whereby former federal military areas are refashioned into habitat for wildlife and outdoor recreation enthusiasts.2 Also included in Kanouse’s counterofficial portrait of this place is the nearby Marion Prison, where inmates, along with local area residents, have long been exposed to toxins leaking beyond the boundaries of the refuge. Porosity is a key theme of Kanouse’s story: the very notion of a refuge—a place that is cordoned off, protected in a baseline state, outside of time and politics, and managed in a one-dimensional way—is a fiction to be troubled.

Her own endeavor began, as she puts it, “with an impasse”—a blockade to visual and informational access. Upon attempting to photograph a cluster of anonymous-looking buildings owned by General Dynamics on the refuge grounds, she and her companions were stopped by a private security guard, who questioned them about why they’d want to take pictures of anything other than scenery, flora, and fauna—these being the proper subjects of “real photography,” he implied. (Fig. 1) This encounter was soon followed by an unannounced visit from two Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents on Kanouse’s front porch, and then an explicit prohibition from any future filming within the park. The impetus for Around Crab Orchard, then, was the artist’s confrontation with an at-once literal and conceptual problem: What other ways can we picture a place like this?

Kanouse’s “answer” involves an assemblage of diverse sources. Perhaps uneven, or unlike, is a better way to describe the amalgam comprising this film, which is furthermore punctuated by the artist’s eloquent reflections about her own research process—a “metanarrative” that provides a kind of horizon line throughout the piece. A number of firsthand interviews with local residents, environmental and social justice activists, and cultural geographers are interspersed with licensed press material from the USFWS and the US Army— together forming a bricolage of voices. (The USFWS denied Kanouse’s repeated attempts to speak with them, and eventually stopped replying to her letters and phone calls altogether.) While the interview is, of course, a staple format within the documentary genre, Around Crab Orchard gives equal weight to less straightforward elements. At several, repeated points, Kanouse’s camera dwells upon the details of a “natural history” display: at one point, we face the fragment of
standing on a piece of land and looking. Speaking to the conundrums entailed in representing any particular place with attunement to the inevitable intricacies, paradoxes, and contingencies at play, Kanouse asks within her narrative script:

Where do we start a story like this? The story of a place, what it contains, what it does? It doesn’t have a plot, some kind of beginning, middle, and end. Instead, it unfolds in space. It has contingencies and adjacencies. [...] The appearance of isolation is a function of scale, where we choose to focus and from what distance. Or maybe it’s a parallax, a perceived shift in an object’s location caused by the position of the observer. The closer we are, the more we distort. Parallax is often called an error, but accounting for it allows explorers to navigate without the aid of a map. At some scales of vision, if we back up far enough, every place seems to touch every place else.

I am interested here in considering the strategies employed by contemporary artists who take familiar sights/sites and make them strange or legible in new ways—who attempt to undo what seems “natural,” to highlight the ideological workings of landscape. Critical documentary films like Around Crab Orchard, which often incorporate extensive and multipronged research, are one breed (other examples that come to mind include the Otolith Group’s 2012 The Radiant and Lucy Raven’s China Town from 2009); tours and other kinds of on-site “interventions,” another. The question of whether or not painting and photography—as media that collapse the worldly into the two-dimensional and the motionless—are capable of relaying the frictions, layers, and interrelations of place is one that hovers in the background, for me. Are there inherent limits to using a medium that, in essence, translates its subject into a scene?

I have begun with Kanouse’s artwork, because I think it is emblematic of a shift in recent years from artists engaging with landscape (as tied to composition, view, or frame) to land use. The term landscape has a longstanding association with the pictorial, with formal composition, and with the aesthetic, in modern art history. The anthropologist Tim Ingold attributes this entire disciplinary orientation—a profound misorientation, in his opinion—to a simple etymological error, albeit one that has had far-reaching consequences:

Of early medieval provenance, [landscape] referred originally to an area of land bound into the everyday practices and customary usages of an agrarian community. However, its subsequent incorporation into the language of painterly depiction—above all through the tradition of Dutch art that developed in the seventeenth century (Alpers, 1983)—has led generations of scholars to mistake the connotations of the suffix—scape for a particular “scopic regime” of detailed
and disinterested observation (Jay, 1988). They have, it seems, been fooled by a superficial resemblance between *scape* and *scope* that is, in fact, entirely fortuitous and has no foundation in etymology. "Scope" comes from the classical Greek *skopos*—literally "the target of the bowman, the mark towards which he gazes as he aims" (Carruthers, 1998: 79)—from which is derived the verb *skopein*, "to look." "Scape," quite to the contrary, comes from Old English *sceppan* or *sceppan*, meaning "to shape" (Olwig, 2008). Medieval shapers of the land were not painters but farmers, whose purpose was not to render the material world in appearance rather than substance, but to wrest a living from the earth. [...] Nevertheless, the equation of the shape of the land with its look—of the *scaped with the scopic*—has become firmly lodged in the vocabulary of modernist art history. Landscape has thus come to be identified with scenery and with an art of description that would see the world spread out on a canvas, much as in the subsequent development of both cartography and photography, it would come to be projected onto a plate or screen, or the pages of an atlas. (FIG. 4)

The trend in contemporary art I wish to identify, in line with Ingold’s corrective, reflects a move beyond, or sometimes even against, "the art of description," and a renewed emphasis on the material rather than the primarily visual aspects of land, often with special attention to issues of labor. The cultural theorist Raymond Williams, in his 1980 essay "Ideas of Nature," in fact cites a fundamental divide between those who approach landscape as a product of nature versus human shaping: "A considerable part of what we call the natural landscape [...] is the product of human design and human labour, and in admiring it as natural it matters very much whether we suppress that fact of labour or acknowledge it."[2]

The landscape photography of Ansel Adams, at least within the past half-century of American art, may best demonstrate the impulse to suppress, or evacuate, the "fact of labour" that goes into landscape’s making. His exquisitely composed, black-and-white pictures feature sweeping landscapes of the American West, typically devoid of any hint of human presence. The scenes are monumental, conjuring a seemingly original moment—and one that is specifically American, yoking the birth of American national identity to the vision of an unpeopled, wild Western frontier. (Williams’s reminder of the etymological link between *nature, native, and nation*—all derived from the Latin *natus*, meaning "to be born"—is particularly apt here.) Formally, Adams’s images hark back to the sublime depictions of the nineteenth-century Hudson River School painters, while simultaneously harnessing the deep tonal contrasts of twentieth-century modernist "straight" photography to extreme dramatic effect.

In the 1960s and 1970s, certain artists were already seeking to counter Adams’s representational schema and the romantic notions of landscape it embodied, some of them taking up industrial and otherwise visibly impacted landscapes to do so. Those photographers who participated in the highly influential 1975 exhibition New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, adjusted their frame of view (in some cases, we can imagine, only ever so slightly) to capture those marks erased by Adams. Instead, they portrayed the mundane, unglamorous processes of suburbanization, industry, and everyday habitation in the American West—underscoring the human-land dialectic of landscapes in formation. (FIG. 5)

In 1973, the American artist Robert Smithson wrote about the "dialectical landscape" in what would be the last published essay in his life. From the mid-1960s onward, he engaged explicitly "disrupted" or "pulverized" sites (e.g., rock quarries, slag heaps, partially constructed highways) in favor to those that evoked a sense of either careful finish or untouched beauty. He was deeply critical of the ecology movement quickly gaining steam at the time and derided a budding "wilderness cult" (his term) for its reductive division between the human and nonhuman worlds, arguing that "[s]piritualism widens the split between man and nature."[3] (Ansel Adams’s widely circulated images were both an illustration and a driver of such a wilderness ethic during this period.) Smithson insisted upon the importance of confronting contemporary environments in all their messy complexity: "The artist cannot turn his back on the contradictions that inhabit our landscapes."[4]

Many artists today similarly turn to the American West, although differently from their predecessors—they approach it as a locus for dramatic displacements and erasures, highlighting links between longstanding myths of a national frontier and the systematic colonization and militarization of space there. (FIG. 4) Their works foreground the politics of land use, reminding us furthermore that the constitutive forces of landscape are for the most part not visible. Artists are perhaps uniquely inclined to sense the less evident dimensions of landscape, to look sideways at how processes become forms, to excavate and recompose...
the marks of submerged and/or suppressed events—whether historical or current—that have played out on a particular surface. (I leave it to other authors in this volume to explore the ways that landscape architecture might also interpret and amplify the behind-the-scenes of landscape.)

Trevor Paglen, an artist and “experimental geographer,” appropriates amateur technologies such as limit telephotography in order to probe the “black world” of the US military-industrial complex: covert testing grounds and other spaces of wartime production that are actively “produced as nowhere,” smudged off of the map, and kept under the public’s radar.8 His grainy photographs of military bunkers in Nevada or streaks left by top-secret flights in the “other night sky” depict not only the existence of such sites and activities, but also the limits of visuality itself. (fig. 7)

The cultural landscape historian and indigenous rights activist Nicholas Brown is meanwhile building a “re-photographic” archive of Glacier National Park in northern Montana. His Vanishing Indian Repeat Photography Project (VIRPP), begun in 2011, is part of a larger inquiry into what he calls the “vanishing logic” that underpins and binds narratives about the disappearance of indigenous peoples in the late nineteenth century—generated by the US National Park Service, among other institutions—with those about melting glaciers today. Brown explains,

[…] the VIRPP interprets colonization as an ongoing process rather than an historical event, which, in turn, sheds light on the structural dimensions of settler colonialism. […] By exploring the conjunction of vanishing glaciers and Indians at Glacier National Park, the VIRPP […] ruptures a temporal boundary that has kept the story of yesterday’s vanishing Indian separate from that of today’s vanishing glacier, insisting, instead, that we consider them as parts of the same story.8

His practice of re-photography is significant not only because it has been employed by certain photographers associated with “new topographies” to document historical developments in the American West, but also because it is a central tool for scientists studying environmental change, such as glacial retreat, over time. (fig. 8)

In one final example, the Boston-based collective the Institute for Infinitely Small Things reproduced for their 2011 piece The Border Crossed Us a segment of the US-Mexican border fence from southern Arizona—an infrastructural element that is largely invisible to most Americans, yet literally marks and organizes the space of the nation-state—on the campus of the University of Massachusetts,
Amherst. (Fig. 9) The artists specify that "[t]his particular section of the fence divides the Tohono O’odham indigenous community along seventy-five miles of their reservation, disrupts ceremonial paths, desecrates sacred burial grounds and prevents members from receiving critical health services." Their own intervention, which orchestrated a direct physical confrontation between the university public and this highly charged, temporary transplant, was coupled with an impressive roster of events led by representatives of the Tohono O’odham tribal community, among others, and involving a strong dialogic component. With its multiple participatory dimensions, The Border Crossed Us posed thorny questions about the political and social dynamics of borders as well as the relations between seemingly distant places.

Today the forces that produce landscape are arguably more decentralized, dematerialized, and delinked from the actual ground than ever before. More accurately, the distances have widened between the places where decisions regarding land use are made and where they are enacted. Whereas Ingold’s medieval worker-shapers, who “with foot, axe and plough, […] trod, hacked and scratched their lines into the earth,” performing labor that was “close-up, in an immediate, muscular and visceral engagement with wood, grass and soil,” in our own day and age, a whole series of geographically dispersed factors and agents—some virtual and others “analog” (e.g., international trade and patenting laws, migrant worker streams, stock market figures, transportation systems)—prefigure any moment before foot or plough pierce ground. Critical geographers have been especially helpful in theorizing the “uneven development” that characterizes our contemporary condition of globalized deferrals and displacements, whereby violence (to land, humans, and nonhumans) is often shifted from one place to another, and in the process further from common view. The literary and postcolonial theorist Rob Nixon further elaborates upon the “slow violence” entailed in many environmental operations (e.g., long-term contamination owing to extractive industries, the severing of ties between indigenous communities and their homelands and ways of life) that unfold across vast scales and in forms and temporalities that are often hard to perceive, compounding their intensity. This, he describes, is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”

Although globalization is not a new phenomenon, since the 1980s and 1990s, various neoliberal economic policies such as the deregulation of financial markets, together with the expansion of transnational corporations and advancements in telecommunication technologies, have ushered in an era in which the global economy operates with unprecedented power and swiftness. The present moment, we might say, is distinguished by the degree to which finance orders space. The sociologist Saskia Sassen has described “finance [as] the steam engine of our time,” a vast force that is “flattening everything around us” as it “grabs more and more terrain” amid an ongoing shift from a world organized largely by national territories to one of global connectivity and jurisdiction. As faraway places become ever more entangled via flows of labor and capital, it is increasingly impossible to tease apart one place from another—a more territorial optic of analysis is demanded.

I want to close with a case taken not from art, but from contemporary land use practices. Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking—the process of injecting water and chemicals at extremely high pressure into geologic strata below ground in order to “free” gas and oil encased within rock—is creating a new topography across the American landscape. Its residual landforms—less monumental and consolidated than those produced by open-pit mining or mountaintop removal—superficially resemble both the pockmarks left by repeated atomic tests in the desert hinterlands, and those apertures quickly enveloping the surface of glaciers and polar ice caps melting due to anthropogenic climate change (itself the result of carbon released into the atmosphere via the burning of fossil fuels). (Fig. 10) Although not exclusive to the United States, the rampant application of this method of resource extraction there is attributable to a combination of specific historical developments, from early white settlers’ perceptions of “open land” being free for the taking under the rubric of “Manifest Destiny,” to the allocation of land into gridded parcels for individual ownership. A distinction between surface and subsurface property rights is furthermore now coming into unprecedented play, as private landowners are increasingly approached by energy companies who want to buy or lease rights to terrain underground—leading to the widespread phenomenon of backyard (and even front yard) drilling, including within densely populated residential neighborhoods. (Fig. 11) This emergent frackscape is arguably the neoliberal landscape par excellence. (And, as is always the case, its repercussions are distributed unequally, exacting disproportionate impact upon those with less power.) It has moreover begun to produce unexpected seismic
happenings, such as frequent earthquakes in Midwestern states like Oklahoma, that signal not only the retreat of any supposed baseline state of nature, but also landscape itself pushing back in unruly, lively fashion. If, as the artists I have discussed insist, the American landscape is not, and never has been, solid, self-evident, or neutral ground, today, it would seem we are entering a phase of previously unknown instability that penetrates the earth’s deep layers, catalyzing new, postnatural fissures and tremblings underfoot.

Notes

Epigraph:

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the College Art Association annual meeting in Chicago, Illinois, on February 14, 2014, within the context of a panel titled "Still on Terra Firma? The American Landscape in Contemporary Art." I pursue similar ideas in the introduction to Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics, a book I coedited with Kirsten Swenson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 1–15.

2 The US Fish and Wildlife Service is a federal government agency within the US Department of the Interior that manages the National Wildlife Refuge System, in its own words: "a national network of lands and waters set aside to conserve America’s fish, wildlife, and plants." Official agency page: http://www.fws.gov (accessed July 20, 2015).

3 Many such "military-to-wildlife conversion" (or "M2W") sites furthermore carry "superfund" status, determined by the government to be the most acutely polluted places in the country. The geographer Shiloh Krupar, who appears at several points in Kanouse’s film, describes them as "green brownfields," elaborating that cleanup at superfund sites is often minimal, following "a different standard for allowable levels of contamination to remain" than elsewhere. Her own research has focused on the Rocky Mountain Arsenal and Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuges, both near Denver, Colorado, the former of which has been repopulated with various megafauna including bald eagles and American bison. She surmises that these creatures, "as signs of purity and the native," play a crucial role in the fabrication of creation stories for such places. She elaborates: "a stockpile of genetically pure bison would return the land to a mythic origin, drawing on imperial nostalgia for the frontier and reversing the historic decimation of the animal and the forced removal of Plains-area American Indians who relied on the bison." Countering this familiar and moralistic conservationist paradigm, she calls for an environmental ethics that "responds to the M2W division of nature/human with a commitment to more uncertain materialities—to stewardship of the wastes and material remains of militarization" and that acknowledges the ways in which violences are still enacted at these sites. Shiloh Krupar, "Where Eagles Dare," in Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics, ed. Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten Swenson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 132–33. In 2011 Kanouse and Krupar established a collaborative research project on the toxic legacy of the military-industrial complex in the United States, in the form of a fake government agency. The National Toxic Land/Labor Conservation Service, according to its mission statement, attends to "the ongoing environmental, economic, and health effects of the Cold War and the American nuclear state." Project website: http://www.nationaltoxicity.org (accessed July 20, 2015).

4 Sarah Kanouse, Around Crab Orchard (2012), HD video, 69 min.


6 The London-based artist Kodwo Eshun, cofounder of the Otolith Group, has written about the essay film—an apt descriptor of
Kanouse’s piece—as a genre of moving image that is both self-reflexive and adequate to the intricacy and contingency of its subjects. “We can think of the essay film as a space-time in which to realize the adventure of thinking. Mainstream film is in too much of a rush. Plots demand that things happen in the right place and the right time.” In addition to reflecting a different temporality than typical films, he states, the essay film understands events themselves in radically other terms: “To return to the event through the image and thereby to use images to provoke new events: it is through double logics such as this that the film essay proceeds.” Kodwo Eshun, “The Art of the Essay Film,” DOT DOT DOT 8 (October 2004): 58. More than disrupting familiar modes of image production and consumption (e.g., in which the viewer remains a passive spectator), the essay film—and what I am calling critical documentary practices, more generally—imagine alternative, and highly fluid, scenarios of past, present, and future.


11 This important exhibition has been reprised multiple times since 1975, most recently in 2010 by the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona, in an exhibition entitled “New Topographics” that subsequently traveled to several national and international venues. See Brigit Salvesen, ed., New Topographics (Göttingen, Ger.: Steidl, 2010); and Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, eds., Reframing the New Topographies (Chicago: Center for American Places, distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2011).


14 Ibid., 164.


18 Within architecture, Teddy Cruz has done likewise compelling work on borders, for instance, in his series of conferences and field excursions on the “political ecologist” between San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico: http://political-ecologist.blogspot.ch (accessed July 20, 2015).

19 Ingold, “Landscape,” 126.

