

Udo Weilacher: **New landscape after Land Art?**

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More than 10 years ago I was dealing with the question of new landscape after Land Art in my book “Between Landscape Architecture and Land Art”, published in 1996. At that time, still a student at the Technical University in Munich, I was desperately searching for new design approaches and new planning strategies in Landscape Architecture, because I clearly felt that we were not able to develop a contemporary design language in landscape architecture by always sticking with the same standardized planning strategies, always concentrated on functional and ecological issues.

Since the decline of the influence of Modernism on style, landscape architecture had been lacking any avant-garde stimulus from which it could evolve its own expressive force. Instead, a persistent, impersonal academicism was spreading. That’s why we had to develop new aesthetics in landscape architecture in order get the people emotionally connected with their living environment again.

To me as a student, art and especially Land Art offered a wonderful variety of concepts and strategies that promised to be of great value for contemporary landscape design and landscape planning in order to vitalize the dialogue between man and nature again. The real threat in the 1990s was – and I think it is still today – the disturbed relationship of man to nature and the ensuing world-wide threat to the ecological balance.

“Does an examination of landscape art open up new avenues for landscape architecture to overcome the serious crisis in human perception or does the subjective approach of art only lead to an aestheticising impasse? Although there are no clearly marked paths through the uncertain terrain between the disciplines, a few points of reference can be identified.” This quote from the chapter “New landscape after Land Art” is taken from the book in 1996

Nothing seemed more natural than for landscape architecture to concern itself with an art, which not only addresses itself to similar themes but also works with the same materials and in the same space. Art, from my point of view, at the same time had an important function as a meta-language of communication between the disciplines. However, the apparent parallels between landscape architecture and Land Art proved to be both a blessing and a curse: on the one hand, art in the landscape creates a semantic bridge across the deep divide between the artistic world and the everyday world which the abstract art of Modernism had opened up with its autonomous system of symbols. On the other hand, there was very great temptation to trust that imitation of art in formal terms would, as it were, "automatically" lead to success.

One of the central purposes of my book was to counter this temptation, because an uncritical, formal imitation would not produce conscious independence in landscape design, but would have ended in a renewed dependence on the model. It could not be simply a question of discovering a new, universally valid blueprint for a modern landscape architecture.

From my point of view, three typical features of Land Art and Art in Nature were of particular significance for the development of a modern language in the landscape.

First, the endeavors, particularly within the Land Art movement, to return to concentration on the essential in a rejection of the verbose designs of the consumer society in terms of language and use of material. This strategy of reduction to primary, archetypal forms was most pronounced in the works of Minimal Art. What started in the gallery as a radical search for objectivity and an almost dogmatic severity became in Land Art a fascinating dialogue between the very complex, sometimes even chaotic forces of nature and the clear geometric structure of the artifact. Endeavoring to achieve expressive simplicity is still today a central concern for many outstanding artists and landscape architects and characterizes their work.

The second influential feature of Land Art, the transience of its works, was certainly the aspect most likely to initiate fierce controversy in a society intent on acquiring, multiplying and safeguarding material possessions. Art in the landscape associates different fundamental ideas with the attribute of transience: transience as resistance to the accumulation of possessions and to the traditional conception of art, as visual expression of the process of time, as a metaphor of the discontinuity of the phenomena, as recognition and manifestation of the phase of decay in the natural cycle of life, as a characteristic of an open work of art and so forth.

It seemed remarkable to me that the potential contained in transience, the vital process of metamorphosis, had received very little attention in landscape design despite its fundamental, even creative significance. Instead, great effort went into reinforcing ready-made (ideal) images of nature and landscape.

The third aspect, the romantic component of Land Art and Art in Nature, was for me in the 1990s of particular relevance. The question was whether the banishment of the romantic from landscape design in favor of the rational had not led to the disappearance of essential qualities of our environment. Indeed, it seemed to me that the creation of a place of meaning and the heightening of perceptibility was not possible without the revival of certain romantic elements.

The book in 1996 was particularly devoted to the creative philosophy and works of members of the mostly European avant-garde, who were – at least from my point of view at that time - providing new impetus for the way in which a language in the landscape, especially in the cultural landscape, would develop in future.

All of these artists and landscape architects had entered into an intensive dialogue with the design of nature in the form of landscape or garden, not treating them in the traditional manner as an aesthetic background to a work of art, but as independent, sometimes even sculptural spaces of perception and experience. None of the protagonists portrayed regarded Land Art as a universal blueprint for a modern language in the landscape. However, they were all aware of the momentum generated by an artistic approach to landscape and used this awareness as a creative force to explore new strategies of design.

Let us quickly go through this list again, adding a few words on the relevance of the represented design strategies of these persons from today's point of view. What did we learn from these artists and landscape architects?

- **Isamu Noguchi's** works are a reflexion of the major aesthetic influence of Japanese art and garden art. Noguchi's conception of space as sculpture reflects many typical elements of modern sculpture and garden art in a unique way, making his work – until today - an

important milestone in the exploration of the area where visual art and landscape architecture meet.

- From the German Artist **Hanns Jörg Voth** we learned about the chances and risks when working with archaic and archetypal forms of art and architecture in a Land Art manner. Voth has developed a form of dialogue with nature, landscape and civilisation, which clearly relates to the pioneering works of Land Art on account of its sensitivity, semantic complexity, romanticism and close links with cultural history. Voth is still working almost isolated in the deserts of Morocco and his works hardly found their way back into the urban environment.
- From **Dani Karavan's** extensive work we learned that art is not vital for people, but helps them to define their identity – even in the urban context. To differentiate between art and landscape Architecture is – just as it was for Isamu Noguchi - not important for Karavan. His work is also an important milestone in the exploration of the area where visual art and landscape architecture meet.
- From **Ian Hamilton Finlay** we learned, how important it can be for art and landscape architecture to draw on the entire repertoire of European cultural history. Finlay, who died in 2006, in particular interpreted the French Revolution as a perfect example of the dialectic of culture and nature, of reason and terror. As a poet Ian Hamilton Finlay contributed his own layer of meaning to the landscape by adding to the garden context poems, aphorisms and quotations cut in stone - metaphors meant to create associations and interpretations on the part of the visitor. Finlay's work cannot be called Land Art but many successful landscape architects were deeply inspired by his works.
- From **Bernard Lassus** we learned many important things – for example that landscape - like millefeuille - consists of many historical layers and levels of meaning superimposed upon each other, making any place potentially unique. It is a consequence of the cultural and age-related heterogeneity of our society that the individual increasingly only perceives particular levels of meaning of the garden and the landscape. Thus, the fundamental problem facing the designer of a public garden is that he has to make different ways of interpreting it possible. He has to develop a complexity that enables a lover of flowers, a child at play and an expert on garden history to become aware of what makes this a special place.
- **Peter Latz** is challenging the practices of a profession, which tends towards opportunism and he dared to adopt a clear position. Latz is one of the best-known contemporary representatives of innovative European landscape architecture and rejects ideas, which seek to portray nature in terms of the bygone Arcadian ideal. Instead he does not attempt to cover up discontinuities and fragments, but seeks a new interpretation of existing structures and elements. From Peter Latz we still can learn a lot about the complex Syntax of Landscape.
- The overriding aim of the work of **Dieter Kienast** was to make garden architecture an expression of the spirit of the age, the garden as a place of meaning, intended to heighten awareness and awaken the senses. We learned from Kienast that this requires not only a study of the history of our culture, but also receptiveness to the diverse cultural manifestations of our age in cinema, video, philosophy, literature, music, advertising and contemporary art - a range which extends from Peter Greenaway to Sol LeWitt or James Turrell. Whereas many fear that they will lose their way in the complex structure of

today's society, Dieter Kienast recognized that it is precisely this complexity, which offers an exciting opportunity for experimental thought and action.

- **Sven Ingvar Andersson**, the unassuming grandseigneur of contemporary Scandinavian landscape architecture, who died in 2007, believed that garden art is one of the visual arts and that, in contrast to the stagnation in many European countries, Danish garden art is developing a wide range of activities. Its particular charm lies in the successful blending of an artistic approach to design and a profound feeling for the nature of the Danish cultural and natural landscape: its spatial composition, the changing seasons of life and the genius loci.
- In the sixties it became evident that our civilization was facing an ecological crisis of disastrous proportions. Since that time a number of committed artists has turned away from art in the business-as-usual sense and began to tackle environmental issues in their work. Among the best-known artists active in this field was **Herman Prigann**, who died in 2008. The theoretical core of his work is "Terra Nova", an ambitious, interdisciplinary program that aims to achieve the aesthetic and ecological recycling of disrupted parts of the landscape. From Prigann we learned a lot about the chances and limitations of ecological art, but it is sometimes frustrating that art in the business-as-usual sense is sometimes installed in the landscape without taking its natural environment serious.
- The intention of the German architect, landscape architect, stage designer and artist **Hans Dieter Schaal** was not to develop a new theory of garden art. The majority of his subtle designs and dream landscapes were primarily to be understood as intellectual experiments, which lay no claims to realizability.
- The American landscape architects, **Martha Schwartz** and **Peter Walker**, have fuelled the discussion on the relationship between landscape architecture and visual arts in a way, which had been virtually unparalleled in early 1990s – especially in Europe. Their impulse was most important for the development of contemporary landscape architecture but the years of pop-experiments in landscape architecture somehow seem to be over and we are looking at new stages of development.
- **Adriaan Geuze** is still a member of the avant-garde of European landscape architecture. Geuze's designs originate in the typical relationship of the Dutch to their landscape. They are, at the same time, characterized by their powerful simplicity and whole-hearted endorsement of the unvarnished aesthetics of popular culture. From Geuze we still learn today that it is worth taking risks in experimental landscape design – not asking about the differentiation between art and landscape architecture.

More than 10 years after the publication of „Between Landscape Architecture and Land Art“ – are we really looking at new landscape? We definitely did learn a lot and our attitude towards landscape architecture has changed. Landscape architecture has regained creative freedom – not only by adapting contemporary art strategies.

But now, that creative freedom has been regained, our responsibility has increased considerably, and we are confronted with a flood of glossy images propagated by the media. One basic question seems to be more urgent than ever: Will landscape architecture contribute to the trivial background noise of interchangeable image worlds? Or will it allow itself the supposed luxury of not just randomly filling the world with images and vocabulary, but enrich it with connections and contents, thus making sense? It is no coincidence that discussions about "less aesthetics, more ethics" started up again a few years ago.

Landscape architecture has obviously also regained its interest in co-operating with related disciplines that work on shaping the environment, above all with architecture and fine arts. The enormous complexity of current problems in environmental design makes unprejudiced co-operation with related disciplines urgently necessary. But unfortunately we are still facing enormous difficulties in the co-operation between landscape architecture and art.

In 2005 we started in Hannover the initiative NEULAND, an important award for art and landscape architecture. Our idea was to spark off intelligent projects between art and landscape architecture on neuralgic spots in our cultural landscape. New projects should trigger the discussion about the meaning and the chance of our landscapes. Six teams were invited – three artists and three landscape architects – to take part in a kind of competition. One year later we initiated an international symposium on the subject of NEULAND. We invited renowned artists like Tadashi Kawamata, Lois Weinberger and landscape architects like Monika Gora or Paolo Bürgi, landscape experts like Karl Ganser – former president of IBA Emscher Park or Stephen Bann art expert from England and many other asking them, if art and landscape architecture can be really relevant for the development of the cultural landscape in Europe. The result of this very interesting discussion is documented in the publication NEULANDⁱⁱ. The summary, roughly outlined, is that in many ways – after more than 10 years – we are still discussing the same critical issues in the broad field between Architecture, Art and Landscape Architecture – partly because what we have achieved in the last decade in landscape architecture still gets ignored very much – especially by the art-world, but at least some architects and urban planners finally seem to have understood in the last 10 years how important the issue of landscape for the future development of our world really is.

ⁱ Weilacher, Udo: *Between Landscape Architecture and Land Art*. Basel Berlin Boston 1996

ⁱⁱ Von Dziembowski, Bettina; von König, Dominik; Weilacher, Udo (Hrsg.): *NEULAND. Bildende Kunst und Landschaftsarchitektur*. Basel Berlin Boston 2007. See also: Von Dziembowski, Bettina; Werren, Joachim; Weilacher, Udo (Hrsg.): *NEULAND. Landschaft zwischen Wirklichkeit und Vorstellung*. Basel Berlin Boston 2009