

Landscape Appreciation as a Technology of the Imagination

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”...take chunks of reality and use [them] as raw materials...”
(George Herms, Assemblage Artist)

Rubble, conglomerates, piles of junk. Landscapes of ‘stuff’ drive us to continuously “acknowledg[e] and interpretively organis[e] the mobile density of the material world” (Smith, 2012). This is evidenced by the increasingly diverse range of activities that emerge from a consideration of stuff, including media geology (e.g. Parikka), speculative realism (e.g. Morton, Harman), artistic practice (Smith, 2012, 2013), design anthropology (e.g. Ingold, Braiterman) and alternative childhood education (e.g. Ward) to list a short selection. Viewed in this way the landscape can be considered a particularly fertile social/material means of generating imaginations (a ‘technology of the imagination’ - to use the terminology of Sneath et al., 2009).

As an illustration, this paper presents a personal account of how an emergent appreciation of the Tokyo landscape has acted as a technology of the imagination. This initially casual appreciation concurrently coalesced into a focused line of inquiry and splintered off into related projects over five years of piecemeal fieldwork. The landscape appreciation is depicted in a meshwork (e.g. Ingold) terrain of projects with localized swellings (nodes). These include research and related activities in Tokyo (collaborative mapping workshops, walking tours with international research groups, spin-off research projects, media interviews, presentations, invited lectures and publications, and a graduate course at the University of Tokyo) and emergent and increasingly divergent interdisciplinary collaborative art and design projects in Auckland, New Zealand (including participatory public art projects, exhibitions, art education, public space design, and interdisciplinary academic pursuits).

In this context, this paper outlines a ‘method of appreciation’ which builds on actor-network theory (e.g. Mol’s (2010), phenomenology (e.g. Merleau-Ponty) and gentleness (e.g. McCann) - aligning itself with a queer or ‘wild’ methodological approach which works with resources at hand and considers that ‘everything is in everything’ (e.g. Halberstam, Ranciere). This is an artistic research frame that values democracy of experiences and methodological abundance (e.g. Hannula et al., 2014) and attempts to follow “and rid[e] upon the forces of examples and projects, using their immanent energy or intensity, rather than building impregnable walls around the proposed practice” (von Busch, 2008).

More specifically, this paper presents an emerging model for interdisciplinary work and collaboration where appreciating (or ‘caring about’ - Sennett, 1970) one’s environment forms a technology of the imagination (Halse, 2013) that generates footholds (sometimes unexpected and only tangentially related) for the ongoing pleasure of research, work and life. This is a contribution to a view of creativity which is less about innovation (as the production of novel solutions) and more about the ability to improvise with flexibility and foresight (e.g. Gatt and Ingold, 2013) as a way of working.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the ‘method of appreciation’ for academics, professionals, amateurs and the general public and presents a challenge to disciplinary egocentrism.

NOTE: In addition to the presentation, the author also proposes an open off-site (after hours) walking-based workshop for JpGu Meeting participants to explore the generative possibilities of experiencing the landscape together as a diverse and interdisciplinary group of researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: non-intentional landscape, generativity, improvisation, experimental methodology