

Hacking the Landscape

Pau Waelder

“Borders? I have never seen one. But I have heard they exist in the minds of some people.”

Thor Heyerdahl

39.713666, 2.779916

In a reservoir located near the Cova de sa Font de ses Artigues, one finds the floating legs and penis of a character whose body, we imagine, is inserted into the side of the hill named Mola de Sa Bastida. The lower limbs, made from polystyrene foam tubes, reed and strings, form a drawing that gently sways on the surface of the water. The mere presence of the legs turns the reservoir into a bathtub, in which rests (or rather, lies) a man of gigantic proportions. Santiago Morilla has chosen a secluded corner of Alaró (Mallorca) to create and place this piece, which would usually be described as a site-specific intervention. An artwork that is made for this space and these coordinates, constructed with somewhat precarious materials ("in the way of Thor Heyerdahl" according to Morilla), partly inspired by memories lived in these mountains twenty years ago. A floating drawing made of raft-like legs whose presence is highlighted by the bright yellow tubes suspended over the green background of the reservoir. But also, an intervention that is meant to be invisible: on one side, the chosen location is quite hidden; on the other, the drawing can only be properly seen from the air. And finally, this artwork is meant to be invisible because its existence is, as that of any living being, necessarily ephemeral.

Mapping defeated beings

Santiago Morilla creates his large mural interventions using the old method of the grid. The surface of a roof is divided into sectors by strings placed at regular intervals, which correspond to the segments of the original drawing made by the artist on a sheet of paper. The drawing is therefore applied to the building by a means of a reverse mapping operation that matches the real space with the sketch on paper. This precise and calculated action results in a composition that retains the spontaneity of the line and the proportions in such a natural way that the drawing seems executed by a giant, steady, hand which had come down from the clouds to turn rooftops into a sketchpad. The characters who inhabit these liminal spaces (thresholds to the sky) are scattered, exhausted, dead or recumbent, on the surface on which they have crash-landed (as in the *Icarus/Papageno* at the Royal Academy of Spain in Rome) or from which, with great difficulty, they emerge (as in the Gyeonggi bathers). They are not, therefore, mere representations on a surface,

but part of the surface itself. They have been incorporated into the building and will now be included on all maps to be made of that place. At the same time, they have transformed the spaces they occupy and force them to be read in terms of the new signs they insert in them, as with the raft-like legs at 39.713666, 2.779916. The dying bathers and deceased Papageno invite us to interpret the repose of the character at Alaró as something similar to Marat's in his bathtub. Unlike permanent murals on roofs and terraces, these legs shake slightly, not by choice, but swaying in the current. This time it was not possible to develop a precise grid, and therefore Morilla had to let his instinct guide him and work at the mercy of the conditions of a surface that does not absorb his drawing, but keeps it held in suspension. The lifeless character does not stay, this time, in the place it has modified. It holds on just long enough to attest his brief (and partial) visibility.

Non - Site

Referring to Robert Smithson's famous *Spiral Jetty*, and the concept of "Non-Site" proposed by the American artist, Craig Owens states: "Like the nonsite, the *Jetty* is not a discrete work, but one link in a chain of signifiers which summon and refer to one another [...] For where else does *Jetty* exist except in the film which Smithson made, the narrative he published, the photographs which accompany the narrative, and the various maps, diagrams, drawings, etc., he made about it? Unintelligible at close range, the spiral form of the *Jetty* is completely intuitable only from a distance, and that distance is most often achieved by imposing a *text* between viewer and work." [1]. Santiago Morilla's artwork in the reservoir of sa Font de ses Artigues, similarly to *Jetty*, can only be perceived at a distance (in this case, at a certain height), and in a much more literal way exists only in photos, videos and drawings made by the artist. It is therefore a *Non-Site* what is reproduced in the pictures and what is the subject of this text. A text that has no choice but to be imposed between the viewer and the work. Because there are no more viewers of this piece that only a few actually saw, an artwork that is no longer visible in its original location but is permanently located at the *Non-Site* it has generated. The piece is not anymore a site-specific intervention at the reservoir where it was floating; it now overlaps the real space (by inverse mapping) in the documentation that is left. And, at the same time, it is not a separate piece which could be conceived independently of that place. It is part of a set of meanings associated with that geographical location, a corner of the earth that has become a landscape .

Artialized Nature

Alain Roger distinguishes between *land* and *landscape* indicating that "the earth is somehow the zero degree of landscape, that which precedes its artialization" [2]. Roger defines *artialization* as the artistic intervention in nature, that can be performed directly (*in situ*) or indirectly (*in visu*, by means of the gaze). The manipulation of nature is an old wish of mankind, who needs to master their environment and modify it at any time to serve their purposes. This is what has been

(apparently) achieved in the cities, where nature is reduced to the domesticated environments of parks, gardens and roundabouts. Only in spaces where the urban machinery fails (wastelands, ruins, building land), those described by Gilles Clément as the Third Landscape [3], nature recovers its domain (albeit diminished). Thus, the city establishes a contradictory relationship with nature, which is relegated while longed for, and it is from this perspective that landscape is created. Consequently, Roger describes it as "an invention of the people from the city" [4]. With a good knowledge of the ways in which the urban environment (also called landscape) can be intervened, Santiago Morilla explores in this case an artialization of nature, *in situ* (by placing a drawing floating in a reservoir) and also *in visu* (by means of the images documenting an ephemeral action). A place that only those who need water to irrigate their gardens pay attention to, and that is ignored in the descriptions of the hiking trails in the area, becomes a space charged with meaning, a site-specific, ephemeral and transparent white cube that temporarily houses a work of art. Land therefore becomes landscape only through the manipulation of the environment, which must be transient because there is no possible integration for it in the natural environment .

Hacking the landscape

In Santiago Morilla's interventions, the bird's-eye view plays a determining role. Satellite view, which has always been the domain of the military and to which we now have access through the maps offered by Google and other companies, turns the land into a territory of control and domination. This is an unusual, unnatural point of view, which leads to an estrangement from what is being observed. At the same time, it is a perspective that shows us what we normally don't see. Undoubtedly, Google Maps has enabled this tactic and detached view of the world to become commonplace, once again reshaping the boundaries of the fiction we call landscape . Projects such as *Google Faces* [5], in which a facial recognition program searches for faces in satellite images of the Earth, or *GeoGoo* [6], an artwork by net art duo JODI that creates compositions with Google Earth icons, exemplify some of new ways in which one can intervene in a territory, be it real or virtual. JODI's example is also particularly relevant because it involves hacking the Google software functionality, testing its limits to develop new features. This is what Santiago Morilla does in his intervention in the natural environment: he hacks the landscape, forces its limits. But he does so with a drawing and a site-specific intervention, which, when executed in the city, is often confused with so-called urban art. How does an intervention that can only be seen from the air modify the landscape? To what extent can we consider a structure of Styrofoam tubes, reeds and strings a drawing? Morilla's action shows that, as Heyerdahl states, borders are only in the mind.

Notes:

[1] Craig Owens, "Earthwords", in Claire O'Doherty (ed.) *Situation*. Documents of Contemporary Art. London: Whitechapel Gallery/ The MIT Press, 2009, 37.

[2] Alain Roger, *Breu tractat del paisatge*. Barcelona: Edicions La Campana, 2000, 21.

[3] Gilles Clément, *Manifiesto del Tercer Paisaje*. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2007.

[4] Alain Roger, op. cit. 31.

[5] Cedric Kiefer, Julia Laub y Christian Loclair, *Google Faces*, 2008.

<<http://www.onformative.com/lab/googlefaces/>>

[6] JODI, *GeoGoo*, 2010. <<http://geogoo.net/>>