TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF AFFECT FOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE/URBANISM

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> '*Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter.*'[1]

In recent times the landscape of landscape architecture and landscape urbanism has become entangled in a series of theoretical and discursive discussions that have permeated from contemporary continental philosophy, and which promise a potentially transformative debate for landscape disciplines. Beyond the obvious issue that these philosophico-theoretical streams embody forms of discursive "isms", and hence beg for a deeper investigation of the implications of such entanglements for landscape architecture/urbanism, their appearance in current approaches to landscape-driven research and design bespeak an important shift that problematizes the conventional understanding of landscape architecture as a *thing* – as a "design", or a "project"-, and instead proposes its reconceptualization as an *action* - as an orchestrated agential act-, capable of fostering affective encounters, triggering new subjectivities based on experience, and driving new forms of heightened responsiveness.

LANDSCAPE URBANISM'S STRUGGLE WITH PERFORMANCE

Conceptualizing landscape architecture as an *action* rather than concentrating our efforts on fixed and stable objects is not entirely new. James Corner's *Recovering Landscape* of 1999 paved the way to more recent developments in landscape architecture, namely the formation of landscape urbanism, which has since significantly contributed in acknowledging the open-endedness and indeterminacy of the development of contemporary and future cities. It has repeatedly proclaimed its celebration of uncertainty, and —with its emphasis on patterns, processes and dynamic relationships— it has admirably pushed forward an interest in "performative design". Such a design approach moves away from fixed identities, essences and places, as well as from complete or finished products, towards a focus on continuous production, and *sustainability*, —understood as "sustained" experimentation and continuous striving towards adaptation, evolution and the facilitation of new encounters. The understanding of landscape "in becoming" advances diversity; it remains open for future elaborations and ultimately works towards sustaining the heterogeneity of life and expression. Landscape urbanism projects that make use of the "performative approach" to design advocate change; yet the notions of chance, indeterminacy, as well as the truly unpredictable and unrestrained emergence, still seem unsettling when projects reach their implementation stage. Relinquishing control and setting relations free is a difficult endeavour. There is often little

room left for the truly unpredictable, for the "new" of genuine creativity to unfold.[2] The possible, open-endedness of the future easily becomes predefined and highly regulated, and when the time is right, it simply actualises the expected outcome. Concepts get lost in translation, so to speak. The future suddenly gets stuck in the present, and a project's design rhetoric reveals itself as a broken promise.

Given that one of the key notions of landscape urbanism is *change*, it is curious to see that the movement has turned its back to one of its closest relatives: gardening. Gardening is far more engaged with change than traditional landscape architecture: it works with actual plants and actual soil and is from the start creatively involved with landscape processes as something tangible and open to experience. In contrast, in the search for a suitable method to achieve desired landscape performativity, landscape urbanism has turned to computer modelling, where process-based design generation techniques are employed to simulate change and ecological dynamics. In this way ecology, despite being highly specific, becomes a model and not a particular, localized condition. Turning ecological mechanisms into a model ultimately overthrows them and firmly secures them in carefully aestheticized representation. Once implemented, such designs commonly fall short of living up to the promise of dynamism and open-endedness implied in the generated diagrams and simulations; their forces remain trapped on screen, exposing how a design that performs on screen does not necessarily perform once it is implemented outside the confines of a computer.

Design-simulations that imitate landscape behaviour and ecological mechanisms often forget that, while software is undoubtedly a useful tool that can produce multiple design alternatives relatively quickly, a landscape intervention —in addition to being a skilful choreography of ecological processes, systemic thinking and environmental problem-solving—, is also a product of culture. When the discussion engages aesthetics, landscape urbanism assumes a reserved stance: even when it explicitly rejects romantic, pastoral or picturesque landscape scenes, it nevertheless pays great attention to the quality and aesthetic appeal of its projects' representations. Compared to ecological issues and design instrumentality, however, the aesthetic component of built projects' is quickly dismissed as superficial or regarded as merely a pleasing bonus. Nevertheless, taking into account that when a project reaches its implementation stage, the dynamic relationships and the flows of the city still need an expression and a form to play out, the design choices all too often fall into with what is tried and tested: simulated neutrality and the continually naturalised. This means that long-established structures are given contemporary forms, only to reinforce the *status quo*, while simultaneously naturalising the persistence of the political, economic and social order. Such newly created landscapes simply reflect the social reality we live in and become multiples of one, duplicating or reproducing the world that already exists, instead of creating a world that invites engagement and activates landscape to meet contemporary concerns. These landscapes do not challenge or dare; they affirm and reinforce our being and acting in the world, and often rely on the traditional aesthetic categories of the pleasant and the beautiful they pretend to reject. Changes are welcome as long as they do not diminish human comfort, safety, or the accustomed quality of landscape experience. While it is true that natural processes and non-human actors are part of the designed assemblage, they are allowed to do only certain things, at certain times and on certain places. The drawn boundaries, within which landscape processes take place, remain fixed and taken-for-granted, therefore limiting the variety of possible outcomes to a set of fairly predictable "changes". In this way, designed landscapes turn into sites of desire after controlled contingency where possible interactions are predetermined. Instead of powerful affects and interesting effects achieved along landscape's performance, they become what their creators initially seemed to challenge and reject: representation of something already in existence. Upon closer inspection, an important amount of work produced today, echoes with what James Corner observed almost two decades ago, namely that '…a combination of nostalgia and consumerism drives [the desire of sentimental recollection] while suppressing ambitions to experiment and invent.'[3]

LANDSCAPE'S PERFORMATIVITY IS AESTHETIC

In this article, we argue that it is precisely the initial denial of aesthetics that causes such conceptual and practical shortcomings, and that when coupling landscape's performative capacities with its power of cultural expression, one should start by acknowledging that performativity and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive.[4] Ecological performativity *is* aesthetic.[5] Under this light, the aesthetics to which we are referring to here, is not the timeless aesthetics which in the western scenic conception of landscape and landscape experience predominantly falls under the categories of the beautiful, the picturesque and the sublime. Instead, our interest lies in the myriad of ways by which the experience of landscape, —understood through an immanent notion of aesthetics—, may trigger specific forms of action. In such a way, aesthetics is read not through its representational qualities, but through its affective, ethically and politically enabling potentials. It is an aesthetics that turns away from traditional aesthetic categories; it is — above all—, unfamiliar, and at its best, unsettling and even otherworldly: it does not comfort, but instead, it confronts and demands response.

In recent times, it has become increasingly difficult to argue against pleasing and comforting experiences, against those brief moments of escape and respite from the speed and anguish of contemporary everyday life, when stillness and the familiar are desired and looked for. We certainly need familiar landscapes, places where we feel comfortable and protected: undulating picnic lawns, curvy strolling paths, fragrant flowers, sound of water in the distance, vegetation that is lush but not overgrown, animals that make us feel we are not alone, but which always remain at a safe distance. But this is not it.

Landscape architecture is expected to fulfil a series of daunting responsibilities: cultivating environmental awareness, creating new "publics", leading the path of future development, providing space for social interaction, influencing quality of life, constructing a sense of belonging, responding to environmental issues, etc. While occasional innocent passivity and detachment is necessary and welcomed, constant reliance on long-established structures not only holds back the development of the field, but also denies the possibility that there is more to the world and to ourselves than what we currently imagine.

Therefore, to begin moving towards landscape urbanism's ambition to go beyond mere appearances, landscape architecture needs to shift its focus from a landscape experience that is tightly knit with vision towards an open-ended encounter with landscape that operates aesthetically through the force of *affect*.[6] Approaching experience and aesthetics from the affective side removes them from the purely visual domain, and places emphasis on affects as pre-cognitive modes of awareness and bodily response. In this way, the question is not primarily *what* we experience or *how* the experienced landscape (or design representation) *looks like*, but rather what this encounter *does*, how it reshapes our capacities to act, to what degree it influences our perception, offering us more than simple beauty or meaning. The revival of affect theory in recent decades is precisely an attempt to understand those domains of experience that fall outside the hegemony of representation and language. The importance and power of aesthetics is therefore found in an immanent sense, through the notion of affect, and not through some transcendental structure or representational system of signification. Affect is shaped exclusively by the participants in an encounter that form a composition, which might, —or not—, enhance the participants' capacity to *act*. Following the Dutch philosopher Spinoza, and his affirmation of openness, while the capacities of bodies involved and the outcomes of an encounter can never be fully known, it is certain that they are always followed by a form of response, by *action*.[7]

THE 'UNFAMILIAR' AND ITS POWER OF AESTHETIC PERSUASION

When discussing affect the focus is not placed on the emotions of the subject, or on those of an individual body; nor is it placed on the individual's capacities to act, but rather on a body's behaviour in relation to other bodies, in specific socio-material formations and provisional or-

derings. French philosopher Gilbert Simondon treats affection *(affectivity)* as a mode of bodily experience that does not necessarily correspond to previously known bodily habits or already constituted frameworks.[8] While perception is already qualified and formed, affect is open and unpredictable. According to Simondon, affectivity is found in-between, between a body and its becomings.[9] Following his thought, individuals of any kind can never be fully complete as they constantly partake in the larger processes of collective individuation through the force of affect.[10] By acknowledging that an individual is not a closed set of relations, but an evolving body with the power of continuous becoming, we also see why it cannot be detached from its surroundings (milieu) and from all other individuals.[11] An individual can only be defined in relational terms: as a phase within a larger process, and contrasted to what it is not, to what it emerged from, and to what it could potentially become.

According to Brian Massumi, an individual (understood as continuous becoming), is both abstract and concrete: it extends to the realm of the body's potential, constantly participating in the virtual, and thus, moving towards what is always already immanently present: incorporeal, yet very *real*.[12] The force of affect (intensity) signals a critical point (threshold) that triggers emergence as individuation on other levels, and while escaping confinement, it nevertheless retains the body's potential for interaction, thus sustaining its continuous becoming. This affective intensity (or continuum of potential) affirms its openness, triggering material-affective responses, which are rooted in the (not necessarily 'human') body, and foregrounding its capacity to act *differently*. In short, affects are pre-subjective, non-cognitive forces and intensities that are experienced prior to consciousness, intensions, meanings or reason. They are nonsignifying, and yet, they influence our actions. Affects are quickly adopted by structures of thought, speech, and conscious reasoning, where they are organised into ordered, and recognisable perception. When we perceive a tree, i.e., we name it "a tree" because we have learnt how a tree should *look* like. Through the course of evolution, perception has aided us in narrowing down the complex reality of a "tree" to meet the operative, yet limited, information we need to navigate through everyday life. "A tree" it may be said, is comparable to a user interface. Yet, what is actually concealed, and what we typically fail to recognize, is the composition of nutrients, energy and water flows, reflected light, respiration, arrangement of pigments, cell division, decay, food storage, absorption, vegetative reproduction, community interactions, etc. that constitute "a tree". A tree will remain a tree, but in order to see it in previously unforeseen ways, that is to say *differently*, we would have to change the register and let ourselves be affected through altered, disordered sensations that challenge and disrupt our habituated perception to form and re-form our bodies. It is in this way that the "unfamiliar" functions. Understood as affect, the "unfamiliar" holds the power of aesthetic persuasion, making us realise that there is more to reality than meets the eye.

In this sense, the "unfamiliar" is of significant value for a host of material and spatial practices, including landscape design, where the engagement with abstract concepts such as affect or desire is not a common or customary approach, but which nonetheless are receptive to aesthetic registers.

Not far removed from concepts that are emerging in the sister field of critical ecology as a response to impoverished or flawed methods to deal with the impact of human interaction with the environment ("novel", "impacted" or "designed ecosystems", i.e.), the unfamiliar in landscape design becomes a potent concept-tool to think and act within so-called disturbed sites: landscapes left behind after intense human (ab-)use. All too often, transformations of such landscapes, instead of working with and within them, tend to propose designs as cosmetic solutions that seek to ameliorate these "undesirable" effects of human development and exploitation. Beginning from restricted representational and dialectic logics that strive towards an unattainable ideal, and relying on tested formulas, techniques and existing models throughout the design process, such transformations commonly end up only reproducing and repeating the already existing realities. In contrast, to dive into the unfamiliar is to enter the complex assemblage that is the milieu; it is to engage in ethico-aesthetic approaches where our agency as humans within the environment is

levered against that of other more-than-human agents and forces. As participants in this becoming we experience the power of experimentation and performativity from a disoriented, decentred, dislocated position, from where we may begin to think and act *differently*.

AESTHETICS AS A CATALYTIC AND CREATIVE FORCE

In order to create something worthy of making today would require to think in *permanent un-familiarity*, that is, in relation to the yet to come, to what does not yet belong in this world, but which is immanent to it. Perhaps it is because landscape architecture and design are material practices necessarily embedded in physical reality, that they often fail to acknowledge precisely that which sets them apart from it. For instance, instead of addressing "a public" as an undefined mass of bodies passively waiting to be summoned, landscape projects could instead approach "a public" as something to be created, sustained and/or disassembled. They could strive to create their own public, a public-yet-to-come and a human-yet-to-be-constructed, instigating novel forms of subjectivity based on mutual interdependence between the human and the non-, or more-than-human, between the "natural" and the "cultural". They could embrace creativity as unrestrained emergence and uncontrolled response to the world, as liberation from the fixity of our times by opening up to the possibilities of being and acting otherwise. The aim would not be to somehow magically bring about social change, i.e., but to envision other alternatives of thinking and making landscape; a landscape design that does not reproduce itself, but renders imaginable the multiple worlds we could begin to inhabit instead.

Under this light, landscape design would not only adapt to changing conditions over time and make room for other kinds of future landscapes, publics and urban futures, but it would also ensure that what is made *is*, —and remains—, as richly diverse as possible. Only at that point could we begin to talk about sustainability or resilience of a landscape in becoming, where the power of aesthetics through affect is what binds human subjectivity, the environment, and social relations together — by engaging us critically, stimulating thought, influencing behaviour, ideas, judgements and desires; by expressing the unknowability, incompleteness, openness, and fluidity of the world. Above all, by triggering action while relentlessly showing that landscape is not a totality, and that the world is not set in stone.

ENDNOTES

1. Deleuze, G. and Patton P. (1994). *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press), 139.

2. Grosz, E.A. (1999). 'Thinking the New: Of Futures Yet Unthought'. In Grosz, E. *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 15-28.

3. Corner, J. (1999). 'Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice'. In *Recovering landscape: Essays in contemporary landscape architecture* (New York: Princeton architectural press), 2.

4. It should be noted that our attempt to bring back the notion of aesthetics into contemporary landscape echoes the work of many contemporary scholars. Although from a slightly different approach to aesthetics, the work of Elizabeth Meyer importantly connects aesthetics to the body as a multi-sensory experience, where she argues that aesthetics is crucial if the design is to have any significant impact on individual or collective life. In: Meyer, E. (2008). 'Sustaining Beauty. The Performance of Appearance. A Manifesto in Three Parts', *Journal of Landscape Architecture 3*(1): 6-23.

5. This refers to the dynamics of natural systems, cycles and processes, as well as to the interrelated and simultaneous ecologies of mental, social and environmental worlds.

6. Landscape experience is conventionally discussed in relation to vision and a perceiving subject. Hence, the experience of landscape often falls under the domain of aesthetic experience or perceived aesthetic value. Aesthetics approached from the visual domain praises 'natural beauty', the world in harmonious balance and the experience of visual pleasure according to long-established structures that may please or offer timeless experiences, but which often holds little power and limited potential to affect and be affected.

7. Spinoza, B. (2002). 'Book III, proposition 2, Scholium'. In Spinoza, B., Shirley, S. and Morgan, M. *Spinoza: Complete works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 280.

8. Shaviro, S. (2003). 'Gilbert Simondon'. In *The Pinocchio Theory*. [Blog, 2003] Available at: http://www.shaviro.com/

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9. Simondon, G. and Garelli, J. (2005). *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (Grenoble: Millon), 23. (Translated in: Fritsch, J. 'From signal to signification in interactive environments', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture 4*. Available at: http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/18155#NOTE0001 [August 09, 2016].

10. Ibid. p. 252.

11. Op. Cit. 8.

12. Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press), 23-45.