Scapes

Masa Bajc

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SCAPES

By

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THESIS

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SCAPES

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ABSTRACT

*Scapes* examines the experience of the *oneiric landscape* conceived through the place of the artwork. Created photographs, videos and the installation are regarded as places that blend the inner space with the outer. *Fukei*, the Japanese concept of landscape, serves as a framework through which I explore the idea of a personal engagement with a place, and its relationships to the conceptions of space and landscape. Influenced by the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard, space is viewed as an expansion of one’s intimate being. The thesis also addresses cross-disciplinary discourse on the meaning of place and its new found significance within the field of photography and related media.
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1. Untitled (Lakescape), 2010, 2 min loop, 1080x720
2. Untitled (Treescape), 2010, 12 min loop, 1080x720

3. INSTALLATION

Installation No.1, 2010.
Credits: Alysia Grummert (clay), Alexander Rosenberg (acrylic, wood),
Chris Wells (metal)

Wall-mounted, dimensions variable.
   5 clay boxes, each 7L x 5W x 4D
   5 acrylic boxes, each 6L x 5W x 4D
   5 wooden shelves, each 1L x 5W x 1D
   Metal plates, replaceable liquid paraffin candles, water
I. INTRODUCTION

Half-submerged in water I face the sky, eyes fixed in infinity, the rest engulfed in silence of a higher density. I find myself floating in a place where two worlds meet. I am a part of both, belonging to neither, someplace in between. On the horizon perhaps. It must be, as it escapes my sight completely. Unless I tilt my head and trace the remainder of the line enclosing a now distorted view. Once I am perfectly still again, it is no longer there. Nothing but the quietness of the vast space blending with my own. A place to return to; a place of a reverie.

The written and visual parts of this thesis aim to explore both the place of an artwork and its ability to generate the experience of an oneiric landscape. In addressing the idiosyncrasies of a place, its relationships to the conceptions of space and landscape are examined. Through mediums of photography, video and installation, I create places that blend the inner world (interior to the body) with the outer (exterior to the body), thereby eliciting the subjective view and intimate engagement with a place. Personal involvement and a higher degree of subjectivity seem to be more inherent in some of the Japanese concepts of a landscape and less

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1 I borrow terms “oneiric landscape” and “intimate immensity” from Gaston Bachelard, Water and Dreams (Dallas, 1983) and Poetics of Space (New York, 1964), respectively.
so in its Western counterparts. For that reason I utilized the concept of fukei as a framework for Scapes which enabled me to, in a more coherent manner, contextualize my view of a space as an expansion of one’s intimate being.

In addressing these issues I found inspiration in the art practices of Yves Klein, Mark Rothko, and contemporaries like Hiroshi Sugimoto, Roni Horn, Olafur Eliasson and James Turrell. However, the phenomenological approach to the experience of a place which I found in the works of humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan as well as writings on imagination by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, truly set the foundation for my research. Complexity of assigning one meaning to a place is reflected in contemporary discourse across disciplines, as places we find in us and around us come with many faces, lacking a definite structure. Bachelard for example valorized a place as “an ingredient in the productions of poetic imagination”, connecting it with space through, what he called, intimate immensity, a concept I heavily draw upon.

Ingrained in my work is a “vision of a submerged view”, one describing a different spatiality that, just like water, subdues sound and slows down movement. Deep, dense and infinite. The oneiric landscape emerges from this view that is void

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2 Japanese concepts fukei and keikan are examined in relationship to English landscape and German Landschaft in the following chapter.

3 According to accessed literature and discussions within the fields of art, humanist geography and philosophy. See Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Casey and Helen Westgeest, ed.

4 On Bachelardian view of a place see Edward S. Casey, The Fate of Place: a philosophical history (Berkley, 1997), p.286

5 Marina Viculin, in an unpublished introduction to Scapes exhibition in Kula Lotrščak, Zagreb, July 7-13, 2010
of geographical reference to a particular place. In a way it constitutes an escape to a
different kind of reality, to a conception of a place or nature one desires. The
experience of it, however, remains undoubtedly real.⁶ Comprised of still and moving
images and an installation piece, more than anything else, each Scape is a place, a
point to stop at and leave the rest to imagination.

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⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan suggests if there is a sense of clarity in people’s experience of place, it might be regarded
as an encounter with the real, see Yi-Fu Tuan, Escapism (Baltimore, 1998), p.32
Scape No. 9, 2009
II. THE ONEIRIC LANDSCAPE

Sterile apartment complex, grey roads, brick city campus and back again. Only a small patch of seemingly untamed thicket on the way, a little oasis amidst the bleakness of a daily routine. Just a few miles down the road, grey turns blue as I chill my feet in late-September waters. With a sense of relief, I fade into the void.

The idea of landscape in my work was initially tied to places of tranquility I sought to find in nature. It seems we escape to different conceptions\(^7\) of nature based on values and meanings we assign to the space around us. But no matter what our assumptions of the space are and what kind of reality we find ourselves in, we are always somewhere, in a place. My interest in place is twofold: I question the emotional engagement we have with a place, and by extension view the space as an expansion of one’s intimate being. In addition, I am concerned with the part place takes in the image making process, inherently regarding the image as a place in itself. This is also true for the place of the installation.

I adopt Yi-Fu Tuan’s view on the difference between place and space, conceiving space as being more abstract. I believe we come to know the space through the inner sense of placement. This is also reflected in Bachelard’s words: “In

\(^7\) see Yi-Fu Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore, 1998)
intimate immensity I enter space from place itself. I come to the immense from within rather than on the basis of exteriority... Place is no longer just a delimited part or portion of space. Space is now wholly immanent in place rather than reverse."8 The notion that our sense of space depends on the place emerges from the evident shift of the universality of space to the particularity of the place9. As geographer Denis Cosgrove explains, this “spatial” or “cultural turn” in rethinking space has brought about new convergence between social sciences and humanities. Relative space is dependant on other processes and objects through which we convey its meaning and is thus open to interpretations from multiple perspectives and disciplines. Furthermore, Cosgrove goes on to say, it seems that “capacity to capture and materialize”10 this relativity lies with the idea of landscape.

I too embraced this approach while working on Scapes. There are several available definitions of the word scape11 which could theoretically apply to my work. Firstly, scape is a forming noun denoting a view, picture, or (literal or figurative) landscape. Both view and landscape, in that sense, connect primarily to visible structures (see Figure 2.1) that in junction with invisible structures form the basis of fukei theory which is used as a framework for Scapes and will further be explained in greater detail.

8 Bachelard quoted in Edward S. Casey, The Fate of Place: a philosophical history (Berkley, 1997), p.294
9 see Edward S. Casey, The Fate of Place: a philosophical history (Berkley, 1997)
10 Denis Cosgrove, Landscape and Landschaft (2004)
11 see Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster Dicitionary
Secondly, *scape* is defined as an act of escaping. In my work, the idea of *escape* to a conception of a place moves on from treating escapism as essentially negative and emphasizes the experience of a different kind of reality. By extension, I draw away from treating landscape-image as a mere record of impressions, rather emphasizing the projection of an experience that is conceived through a personal engagement with a place.\(^{12}\) Finally, *scape* is an anagrammatized *space*, playfully revealing the subject of inquiry: the way we experience space in us and around us.

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\(^{12}\) On relation of self to place see Yi-Fu Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore, 1998) and *Space and place: the perspective of experience* (Minneapolis, 2001)
Fig. 2.1: Conceptual framework of Scapes

This figure illustrates how definitions describing a SCAPE branch out into a map of interrelated ideas relevant to conceptual and formal development of my thesis. For example, FUKEI is defined in terms of VISIBLE and INVISIBLE structures as explained in the text. It is also a specific understanding of a LANDSCAPE (and SPACE by extension) characterized by personal involvement attached to the concept (INTIMATE BEING) and EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT we have with a PLACE.

On the other hand, we ESCAPE to a conception of a PLACE at the same time experiencing a different kind of REALITY. It is through PLACE we know SPACE which is viewed as an expansion of one’s INTIMATE BEING. PLACE is also “an ingredient in productions of POETIC IMAGINATION” and an essential part of an oneiric landscape or a REVERIE, views adopted from French philosopher Gaston Bachelard.
The influence of fukei photography on my work, as well as the conceptual underpinnings of fukei theory within geography, form the theoretical backdrop of Scapes. I was first introduced to the idea through the metaphysical images of Hiroshi Sugimoto. Passage of time and remembering the past, as seen in his work, are essential elements of fukei photography. By privileging place in my discourse, I slightly drift away from the concept that defines the landscape photograph in terms of the flow of time. However, time is emergent from space not only in the subjective sense but even in physics and general relativity.

In the Japanese language fukei is a composite of two characters: FU (風) meaning “wind” or “flow” and KEI (景) signifying a “view” or a “scape”. While “Fu” pertains to the invisible structures, such as a feeling or atmosphere, “Kei” stands for the visible structure of “sun light and shadow”. According to Ueda, “fukei is a phenomenon of dynamic change from “landscape” to “place” through individual landscape perception” and focuses on the individual experience of the land. In his introduction to fukei photography, Vartianian points to the paradoxical nature of a landscape that is seen this way: it is a fixed view of something that is always flowing. Landscape is ever changing and transient in nature.

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13 Definitions according to Ivan Vartianian, ed. *Writings by Japanese Photographers* (New York, 2006) and Ueda (Kassel, 2009)
14 Ueda (Kassel, 2009), p. 13
“Every time I view the sea, I feel a calming sense of security, as if visiting my ancestral home; I embark on a voyage of seeing.”¹⁵, Sugimoto writes about *Seascapes*, a series of photographs he has been taking since the 1970s. The still, abstracted space of water and sky invites us to see and feel both visible and invisible structures in his work. Facing a visually non-referential space takes us on an emotional journey into a psychological realm. This is also true for Alfred Stieglitz’s *Equivalents*, images of clouds taken from 1923 to 1931 and perhaps the first intentionally abstracted series of photographic work. Stieglitz elegantly redefines photography’s inherited realistic view by using form, shape and color to represent his own experiences and contemplations. Although there is no certain proof Stieglitz was directly influenced by Asian art, his work has recently been analyzed in that context¹⁶, pointing to the possibility that his use of abstraction in order to express emotional states might have been influenced by the ‘new way’ of seeing prompted by the emerging presence and influence of Asian art on Western art at the time. On that note, *Scapes* has been constructed in a dialogue with both Western and Eastern photographic traditions that employ a certain use of abstraction in transposing reality. However, in that context, works of Mark Rothko and Yves Klein were critical and more relevant to my understanding of how the idea of space developed, both formally and philosophically.¹⁷

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¹⁷ see Michael Auping, ed., *Declaring space* (New York, 2007)
Going back to the previous discussion of fukei, it is important to note that the Japanese distinguish among several concepts of landscape, fukei and keikan being most commonly used. While keikan closely relies on the Western idea of landscape, being derived from the German Landschaft, fukei emerged from China in the 8th century and does not have an equivalent in the European languages.\textsuperscript{18} The main differences between the two lie in the degree of personal involvement attached to the concept and is essential to fukei. Although nowadays we understand landscape through its multiple meanings\textsuperscript{19} that also incorporate subjective human experience, principles of fukei, in addition to the movement's specificity within the field of photography, has provided a better conceptual structure for Scapes.

\textsuperscript{18} Hirofumi Ueda, \textit{A Study on resident landscape perception through landscape image: 4 case studies in German and Japanese rural communities} (Kassel, 2009), p. 14

\textsuperscript{19} For detailed discussions on concepts and differences between landscape, Landschaft and fukei, see Denis Cosgrove, \textit{Landscape and Landschaft} (2004) and Hirofumi Ueda (Kassel, 2009)
Hiroshi Sugimoto: Sea of Japan, Oki, 1987, SFMOMA
Interrelation of visible and invisible structures brings forth questions about presence and absence in the work. What is it we see or sense in the image? How does our inner understanding of space and landscape relate to the outer? In a way this is illustrated by Roni Horn's installation Pi (1998), in which she creates a landscape from photographs taken from her series “To Place”. She explores relationship between the image and the architectural space, circumscribing the viewer with the horizon of photographs. On the other hand, the installation You are the Weather (1994-95) doesn’t necessarily function as a place itself. As we are surrounded by a hundred almost identical portraits of a woman, our sense of place seems to emerge from our relationship with her, perhaps being rooted in the identity of the subject.

This kind of a relative approach to place is in accord with aforementioned contemporary spatial conceptions that regard place as lacking an independent existence and elicit the subjective view. From a philosophical point of view, Casey discusses the primacy of place over the universality of space which dominated theory and practice from the Renaissance through modernity, and concludes that “place in itself is no fixed thing: it has no steadfast essence”. Horn herself observes that “the landscape is the point at which something becomes too complex to be itself only: it’s synthetic... a landscape includes everything you put in it.”

20 Roni Horn in interview with Lynne Cooke in Lynne Cooke, Roni Horn (London, 2000), p.18
21 According to Cosgrove, Landscape and Landschaft, p.58
22 Edward S. Casey, The Fate of Place: a philosophical history (Berkley, 1997), p. 286
23 Roni Horn in an interview, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_10_90/ai_92352650/pg_3/ (accessed March 24, 2010). This idea is also expressed in Janin Armin’s review on “Roni Horn aka Roni Horn”
In order to create a notion of a place in between, of a reverie, I utilized relationships between movement, stillness, perception and imagination employed among the media used (photographs, videos and installation). In still images, movement is invisible but perceived through tilted horizons and empty spaces that infinitely unfold before those who stop to wonder. Bachelard identifies the type of movement that comes from within: “As soon as we become motionless we are elsewhere: we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of a motionless man”.24 The aforementioned relationships are further explored in two moving images that play with the viewer’s perception by enhancing the illusion of stillness and challenging the viewer to quiet himself in order to actually see the movement. At the same time these visual poems serve as an inquiry into the moving potential of a still image.

Installation literally embodies the idea of a fixed view of something in flux. On one level there is the physical movement of a viewer, while the site of the installation is fixed. In the dark we are confronted with a dim glow and sharp hissing sounds that come from the same direction. If we stand close enough it is possible to see steam rising from a heated metal plate, indicating water is dripping from a structure above. Indeed, it is through the element of water that the installation inhabits many places at the same time. A drop of water never quite realizes its


destination as it instantly disappears from a surface it is trying to reach, just to
journey back, once more, to its first state of being. The sound keeps us aware of this
never ending cycle, as we absorb and become a part of the experience.

Blending the quietness of inner and outer spaces lends Scapes a sense of
wonder and revelation, assimilating them into a personal reverie. A daydream
emerges through inner sense, adhering to invisible structures of landscape that take
part in a production of poetic reality. Once more I turn to Bachelard who reflects on
the nature of such a landscape: “Before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape
is an oneiric experience... But the oneiric landscape is not a frame that is filled up
with impressions; it’s a pervading substance.”25

25 Gaston Bachelard, Water and Dreams, (Dallas, 1983), p.4
Scape No. 7, 2009
III. PLACE TO RETURN TO

In water, awakened, I dream.

Still and moving, visible and invisible, heavy and light, water never stops, it is always flowing. Its complex nature reveals itself through richness of meanings. The surface of water mirrors that which it faces. Its depths hold and reflect our intimate desires and fears. But it is upon us to choose what we see.

Water is always with me, within me, never letting go. That place from within forms my view, through there I sense the space around me. In Water and Dreams I find perhaps the most genuine depiction of this relationship I feel: “To disappear into deep water or to disappear toward a far horizon, to become a part of depth or infinity, such is the destiny of man that finds its image in the destiny of water… Perhaps more than any other element, water is a complete poetic reality.”

26 ibid, p. 12 &15
3.1. PLACE OF THE STILL IMAGE

Place is gaining more attention across disciplines and, it seems, a new found significance within photography that was traditionally concerned with issues of time. The recently published *Take place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives* (2009) theorizes the complex relationship of place and photograph in the context of contemporary art projects which often employ multimedia. As I never thought of an image as a mere trace of a place, Helen Westgeest’s remark that “the photographs themselves create new meaningful places, of which we can only find traces in the real world”\(^\text{27}\), was a view I readily agreed with. Past the objecthood of photographs, I think of my images as places in themselves.

The idea is not entirely new. Rothko thought of his paintings “as places where an action is staged and that describe ‘an unknown adventure’ in an unknown space”, almost like a performance for artist and viewer alike. The *Artist’s reality* (2006) had a profound influence on my working process, as did a personal encounter with Rothko’s work at Tate Britain in 2009. That work used controlled and dimmed lighting, helping to create an intimate relationship between the image and the viewer. I appropriated this method in setting up my thesis show.

\(^{27}\) Helen Westgeest, ed., *Take Place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives* (Amsterdam, 2009 p. 6
Mark Rothko, No. 14, 1960, SFMOMA
Scape No. 2, 2008
Production of a feeling or an atmosphere in the works and their relation with the viewers was from a start a major concern. At the thesis exhibition opening, a visitor reflected on his experience with an image, saying he felt floating himself, sensing the space through atmosphere. Another person had a meditative experience in the encounter with the installation, while the same was opposed by a viewer who found it to be somewhat unsettling. Although a certain atmosphere is already present, the way it is perceived seems to stem from the intimate space of a viewer who engages it.

Gernot Böhme lends a valuable perspective with his general theory of perception in which he proposes atmosphere as a concept of a new aesthetics. He too believes that a work of art possess its own reality, and although we can interpret it, this might lead to “denying the experience of the presence of the represented”\(^{28}\), which is atmosphere. He defines it as an “in-between”, through which human states and environmental qualities are connected\(^{29}\), a shared reality between the perceived and the perceiver who is bodily present.


\(^{29}\) ibid, p.114
3.2. PLACE OF THE MOVING IMAGE

*Untitled (Treescape)* and *Untitled (Lakescape)* are video loops constructed from still images, 12 and 2 minutes in original duration, respectively. Long-exposure still photographs are reassembled non-linearly, transitioning into each other. Very slow and subtle changes\(^{30}\) enhance the illusion of stillness and urge the viewer to question the moving image.

Framing of a sequence is fixed as the element of light differs in each still and consequently becomes essential to breathing life into inanimate imagery: movement occurs as a function of changing spatial qualities of each layer rather than from their succession in time, which becomes a secondary concern. Created video loops can be understood as fixed views (or projections) that are infinitely in flux. There is no marked beginning or ending, no visible credits or titles. The light itself circulates in *Treescape*, the very element that makes the image now stares back at us. In *Lakescape*, waves already annihilated with long exposures rise up and fall down on the horizon never reaching the shore, forever stuck “in between”. The wonder of moving stillness touches the quietness we find within ourselves.

\[^{30}\text{Formal influences include works by Jeremy Blake, Chris Marker and Michael Snow.}\]
Video stills from Treescape, 2010
Scapes, exhibition view, Rochester, 2010
Installation No. 1, 2010
3. 3. PLACE OF THE INSTALLATION

The idea for the installation matured in an attempt to interact with places still and moving images failed to inhabit. Built around the same principles, the installation further experiments with the notion of place and construction of experience, introducing the element of physicality that enhances the performance of a viewer. Today it is perhaps the most dominant form of contemporary art, rooted in practices of minimalism and conceptual art and influenced by the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *Take Place* (2009), Anja Novak inquires into the site of installation art, observing how our experience of it hovers between an outer, ‘perceivable place’ and an inner, ‘imaginary place’\(^3\). Due to its ambiguous quality, she thinks of a place as being “theatrical”, inviting viewers to perform and observe their experience at the same time: viewer’s experience is the real site of the installation.

I vividly remember my first encounter with James Turrell’s light installation at Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo in 2007. Approaching the blue illuminating rectangle, I was at first unsure of what I was seeing. I wanted to confirm with a touch, but my hands went right through it. Confronting this set-up space made a lasting impression and my experience was that of an uplifting sensation of wonder.

\(^3\) Helen Westgeest, ed., *Take Place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives* (Amsterdam, 2009), p.135
Turrell’s work was both real and dream-like, like a “wordless thought”\textsuperscript{32}, a kind we see with our inner sense. Experimenting with sensory experience is also at the core of Olafur Eliasson’s artwork. He often recreates natural environments, questioning our perception of place and conditions that define space. As working with installation was a new territory for me, studying the works of Turrell and Eliasson helped shape my ideas into producing an atmosphere that becomes the core of our experience.

In the process of developing the visual part of my thesis, I was concerned about showing images and the installation together, worrying that encounter with the image might be reduced to a comparatively representational experience. However, moving through the exhibition space between still and moving images and the installation room became a part of the experience. A place of an image and a place of an installation are both absent in a way, beyond our grasp, but we get absorbed in them, propelled by inner desire to reach them and make them our own. Through the atmosphere, every Scape became a part of the same reverie.

\textsuperscript{32}Craig E. Adcock, \textit{James Turrell: the art of light and space} (Berkley, 1990), p.227
IV. CONCLUSION

*Destination: someplace unknown.*

The notion of a daydream is something we carry inside us, it is a part of our inner place which sometimes coalesces with that outer place we inhabit, influencing our perception of reality. Exploring it, I was predominantly guided by the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard, consciously limiting my inquiry to the experience of the oneiric landscape\(^{33}\). (either get rid of it or expand footnote)

The journey I started with my eyes closed, floating on the surface of water, became an exploration of seeing, of being suspended between inner and outer places.

Although I have barely scraped the surface, I am hopeful *Scapes* are only a first milestone in my experimentation with the way we sense space.

\(^{33}\) According to Casey Bachelard neglects ‘sexual, social, political and historical aspects of space’ in Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: a philosophical history* (Berkley, 1997) p. 296
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