

Sites of Friction:
On Architecture's resistance to
embrace Entropy

EWA ZIEMIECKA



1. Gainsbrough, T. (1750). Mr and Mrs Andrews.

Introduction

Their heads are turned towards us – viewers, their eyes fixed on someone who occupies the same position as the one looking at the painting - the painter. Both them and us are engaged in some form of dialog, mediated by the one whose strokes produced the very artwork. The subject of this silent contemplation is what stretches behind them – the landscape, or one might prefer – the land. This is what is so striking about this painting, or rather its implicit relationship with the figures looking at us. Thomas Guisborough’s intention, as Berger emphasized, was not to depict them as a couple in nature in the Rousseauian understanding of the word, but as proud landowners whose ‘proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions’¹. Two figures, whose names we shall now reveal as those of Ms and Mr Andrews, were among people who took ‘pleasure of seeing themselves depicted as landowners and this pleasure was enhanced by the ability of oil paint to render their land in all its substantiality’²

This ‘physical and mental entity called land’³ , as Corboz puts it, can be understood as human transformation of earth, both physical and mental, but also as an indefinite process perpetuated by the cultural and scientific developments and various practices of representation and demarcation. Along this trajectory, human – nature relationship has undergone a significant recalibration. How has nature become the land and land turned into propriety? We are again in front of the Guisborough’s painting. It is one of those many representations which seem to confirm the fact that how we depict our environments is never neutral and never without the consequences. It has an impact on how represented spaces are perceived, how we relate ourselves to the natural environment, how such is being managed and eventually constructed. The painting reveals not only the truth behind our attitude towards the natural but the problematics and implications of the representations on our perception of the natural.

Human proprietary stance towards transformation of earth has implications, and those are visible through what is a dominating tendency in architecture and other spatial practices.

1. Berger, J. (2012). Ways of seeing. London: British Broadcasting Corp.

2. Berger, J. (2012). Ways of seeing. London: British Broadcasting Corp.

3. Corboz, A. (1983). The Land as Palimpsest. Diogenes, 31(121), 12-34. doi: 10.1177/039219218303112102

Engagement between the two, as Gissen highlights, has been historically preoccupied with incorporating more normative forms of nature⁴. Those which seem not to endanger the practice or established ideals and narratives. By ‘forms of nature’ I mean both the processes and consequent spatial situations. But what seem to perpetuate this tendency and tighten up the narrative, are architect’s modes of production and representation. Especially with the current use of software, architects tend to depict spaces as idealised landscapes, static and devoid of any agency, smooth, seamless and eternally purified by the invisible hand of some unidentified agent. Those representations, yet reveal a tragic condition of our constructed environments and our relationship with it, disclosing our aspirations and culturally constructed ideas about what is beautiful and aesthetic. Such environments are culturally and politically inflicted, their condition contingent on humankind and his architectural and infrastructural ideals. Picon notes interestingly that: ‘In many cases, the relation between man-made constructions and nature is inverted, nature finding itself henceforth circumscribed, as if confined within mechanisms that no longer have anything to do with it.’⁵. This perverted relationship, cultural ideals and politics of consumption seem to strongly influence, the way we construct, what we expect and how we care for our built environment, which is subjugated to an endless practice of maintenance and purification. Dialectic between destruction and repair, under such spatial regime, is contaminated by what is more detrimental than useful for our vital growth as a specie and our entanglement with the non-human agents or natural processes.



4. Gissen, D. (2012). *Subnature: Architecture's other environments*. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.

5. Picon, Antoine. 2000. "Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust." Translated by Karen Bates. *Grey Room 1* (September): 64–83.

Sites of Friction

Frictions emerge due to underlying and systemic imbalance between nature and culture, in this case certain transformative processes and architectural spaces. Historically, this was given a name of a divide – namely, what belongs to the natural realm can not be the outcome of human intervention; secondly, cultural development is achieved against nature. Latour argues, that distinction between nature and culture never existed, and yet intellectual differentiation between the two is so embedded in our culture, that it succeeds at producing very physical results. As to resolve this very issue, Latour proposes ‘Parliament of Things’ wherein natural phenomena, social phenomena and the discourse about them are not seen as separate objects to be studied by specialists, but as hybrids made and scrutinized by the public interaction of people, things and concepts.⁶ Culture itself can be compared to ecology within nature, such which systematically produces various mechanisms of differentiation. Morton gives this separation a different name – severing, i.e. a foundational, traumatic fissure between reality and the real⁷. Where reality signifies the human – correlated world, while real, the ecological symbiosis of human and non-human parts of the biosphere. This process can be best exemplified by his very poetic and metaphorical description, which in its substantiality holds a strong architectural or spatial/physical character:

‘Since nonhumans compose our very bodies, it’s likely that the Severing has produced physical as well as psychic effects, scars of the rip between reality and the real. One thinks of the platonic dichotomy of body and soul: the chariot and the charioteer, the chariot whose horses are always trying to pull in another direction.’⁸

Severing, indeed, produced various physical and spatial phenomena. In the context of human altered environment I call them - sites of friction. This is where problem of differentiation becomes visible, intellectual problem undergoes process of spatialisation. Modern city, as landscape saturated by human endeavours⁹, might be the one most affected by them – a real manifestation of the aforementioned frictions, self – perpetuating and self – inflicting.

Sites of friction produce the city and in return are being produced by it, granting its very functioning as a construct choreographed by modern infrastructural, aesthetic and hygienic normativity. As previously discussed, they emerge due to imbalance between natural and cultural phenomena, as a direct manifestation of the tension between what is and what is expected, how things naturally behave and how they should to serve well respective human activity. Elements constituting such sites, ideally, are in equilibrium , their interaction ensures sites very existence in a culturally accepted form. In such a case, world is ready – to – hand¹⁰ as Heidegger sets out. Only, in case of an error, becomes present – to – hand¹¹, and this very engagement with stuff of urban phenomenology being forced out of its proper state by the perverseness and insubordination of matter¹² is, hypothetically, what might help to re – establish our very relationship with nature.

Should sites of friction be concealed and inaccessible, what can be identified as one of the modern infrastructural ideals, we will never learn and reposition ourselves towards natural phenomena. We will never get an opportunity of destroying ontological concepts (being in the world):

‘When tradition thus becomes master, it does so in such a way that what it ‘transmits’ is made so inaccessible, proximally and for the most part, that it rather becomes concealed. Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial ‘sources’ from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand.’¹³

In order to reposition ourselves towards frictions and challenge the very existence of their spatial manifestations, we should first discuss what do those constitute and what might they produce. Firstly, their existence is not always evident, thus their elements. Take for instance façade where undisturbed glazed surface does not reveal any form of unwanted intrusion.

6. See Latour’s “We have never been modern”

7. From ‘Humankind’ by Morton

8. ibid

9. Picon’s definition of a technological landscape

10. Heidegger’s discussion of two modes of being in the world, see “Being and Time”

11. ibid

12. Krauss citing Bacon, to give an underlying condition of matter and form and its tendency to fall into state of formlessness. See “Formlessness: A User’s Guide”

13. See Heidegger’s “Being and Time”

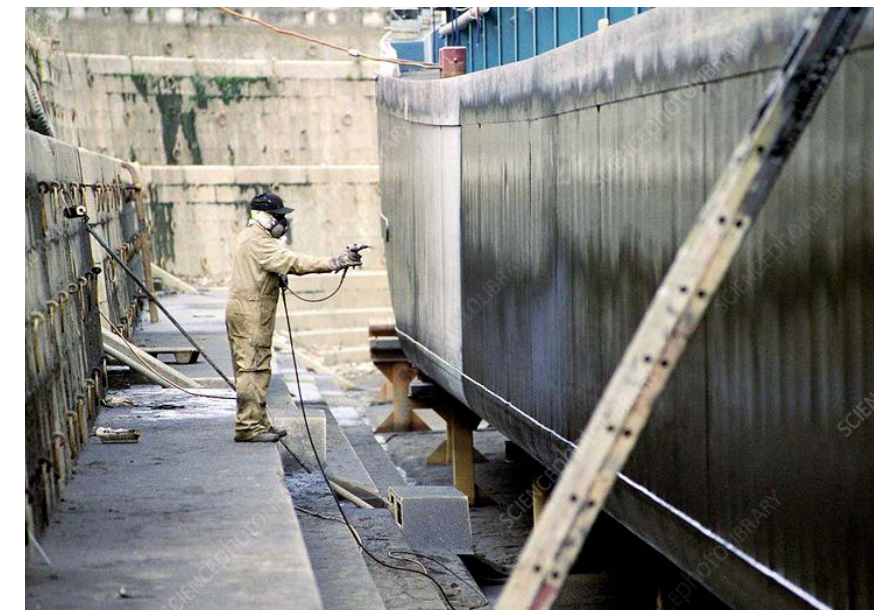
In that case, we might not notice the enormous effort invested in order to preserve it. Both its physical character and maintained state are culturally situated. We glorify cleanliness which in the case of such architectural object is analogous to 'non – presence', act of cleaning is necessary to preserve its modern transparency. Ritual cleaning breaks with history by erasing its temporal effects¹⁴. The fact of it being a site of friction is anchored to its unstable limit between inside and outside, continually changing in response to environmental conditions like dirt, dust or pigeons¹⁵. We can thus describe sites of frictions as culturally driven phenomena, ceaselessly endangered by various forms of unwanted processes, sites requiring maintenance and tools, which drive the technological progress and invention forward.

On one hand, those settings are becoming increasingly invisible, where more sophisticated systems are being invented in order to conceal their presence. On the other hand, they are being composed from ever greater range of materials, thus requiring ever more engagement¹⁶. Although it is impossible to speculate on the future dynamic and character of those sites, we might theorise on the danger of those becoming invisible, and our cities becoming seamless. Firstly, they pose a real danger of our further separation from the natural, transformative or entropic processes; secondly, they will further continue to mould our sense of what is and what is not aesthetic, and therefore endangering the existence of everything else that falls beyond this narrowing category; thirdly, concealed, will cease provoking us to question normative character of our cities; lastly, absence or invisibility of frictions might diminish our ability to improvise, imagine and invent solutions.

14. From Maintenance Architecture
by Hilary Sample

15. *ibid*

16. See "Out of Order" by Stephen
Graham and Nigel Thrift



Architectural Representation and Uncertainty

Representation is never innocent, it has profound influence on how we relate to the world, how we position ourselves in it, what we perceive as normatively appropriate and how we shape the environment. It's involvement in daily weaving of the narratives and reactions towards various forms of spatial situations is not something we can ignore, particularly in the context of modern technology and software which enables to mimic the reality ever so well. That is to say, representation, and architectural representation in particular, has an undeniable power to set certain ideals, standards and expectations towards the space. They engrain those in the collective apprehension, and thus become increasingly difficult to alter. Let's take for instance work of Piranesi which marks a significant change in archaeology, aesthetics and architecture. It seems to allow the viewer to reposition with regards to the idea of ruination, decay and destruction, concepts and spatial occurrences deeply romanticised through his technique and use of drawing. Could representations such as this, really have no influence on emergence of theories and ideas, in this case anti – restoration movement, where Ruskin rejects the idea of restoration, labelling it as producing inauthentic objects, while considering natural property of things to age and mature as an essential quality¹⁷? Logically, the way we represent, draw, the technique or medium, further defines our attitude towards the space. For example, the use of pictorial perspective deeply influenced, not only the depiction/reception of the space, but more importantly its very construction. Consequently, it started taking form of 'infinitely extended lines radiated across the landscape' opening up and redefining the 'inward looking enclosures of the medieval period'¹⁸. This is well exemplified by renaissance and baroque gardens, where nature is humanised by man, becoming a symbolic representation and reconstruction of the landscape which lays beyond.

Depictions, in short, disclose the world. When analysed, a referential structure is being uncovered, where object of representation, its materiality, form, relationship to the environment or cultural, political and economic constructs, even

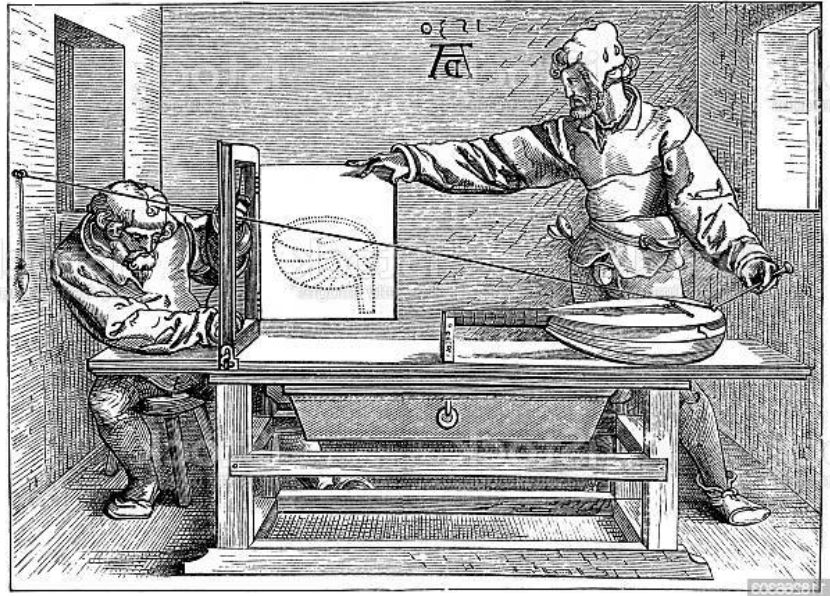


medium and technique, are related to each other. They indicate our collective preferences towards spaces we construct.

Following this line of thought, we can conclude that representation discloses and conditions nature – architecture engagements and sites of friction themselves. If it helps to establish certain infrastructural and architectural ideals, into which space is entangled, how can we ignore its importance and potential of acting reversibly. Architectural representations usually ignore the unwanted occurrences in the building, those which endanger the ideal or the ideal condition of the project. Transparency of a glazed façade is always at its high, it is never intermediate. Roads and pavements, never littered and devoid of holes or cracks. Surface of the building, smooth and clean, while plants carefully curated within the scheme, geometrically organised, rarely spreading where they should not. Change and flux of the architecture's ideal condition is always held back in such representations, analogically in the real life. While there are sites where such ideal condition is disturbed, this is rarely purposeful. What emerges is the question of how this performative function of natural processes of destruction/transformation could be harnessed and incorporated into representation and construction.

17. Ruskin on preservation. See "The lamp of memory," by John Ruskin.

18. Corner, J., & S MacLean, A. (2000). Aerial Representation and the Making of Landscape. In *Taking Measure Across the American Landscape* (pp. 15-21). London: New Haven.

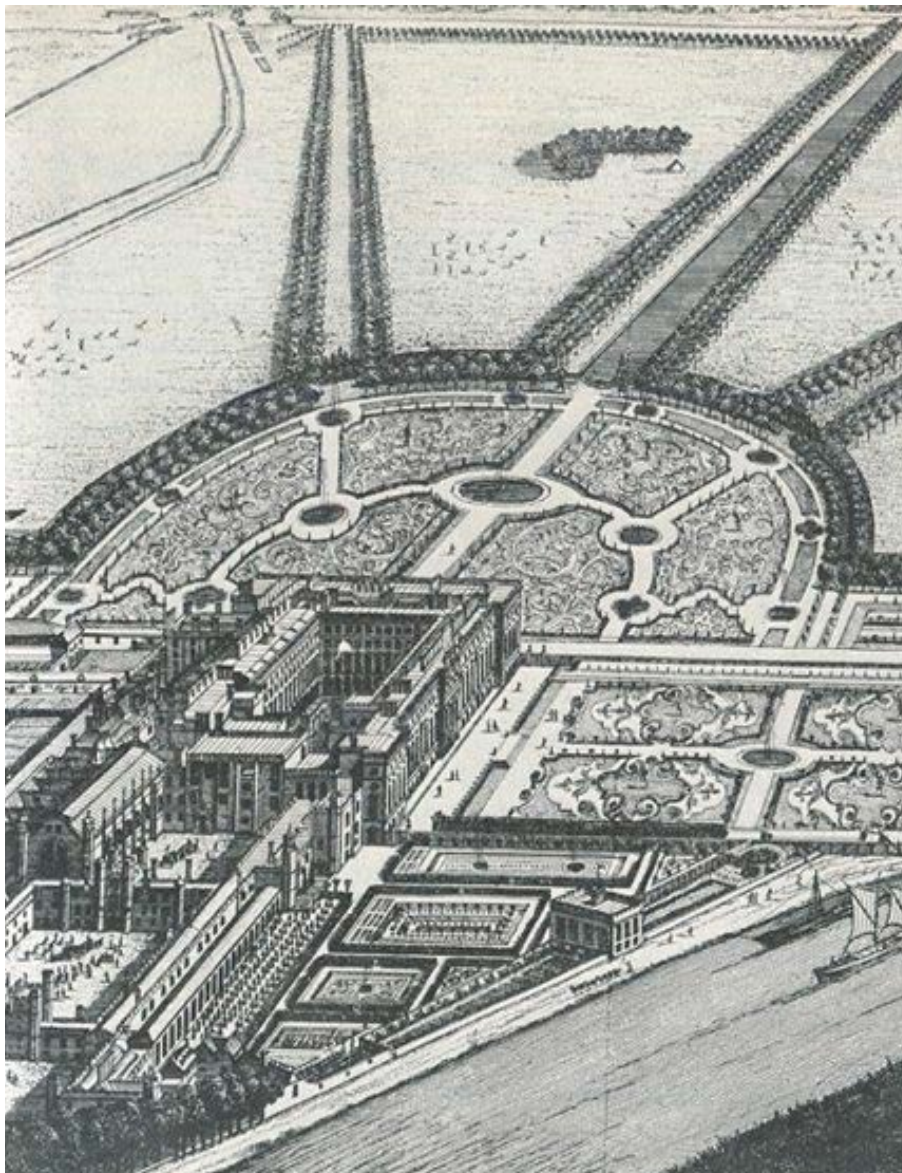


Dialectic Between Destruction and Repair

Sites of friction disclose a worrying dialectic between destruction and repair. Destruction to borrow from Heidegger's terminology, is a necessary process or function of our being, a method of unearthing the deeper truth, through which we challenge ontological concepts and tradition¹⁹. While, presently, destruction is rather perceived as something negatively charged, that which should be held of by the practice of maintenance and repair, it is rarely thought of as an important aspect of our ability to learn, think and invent. Stephen Graham in his 'Out of Order' highlights this possibility multiple times, further indicating that the quality of improvisation is key since fault-finding and repair is a process of ongoing, situated enquiry²⁰. He also questions the object of repair, asking: 'Is it the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it, or some 'larger' entity?

There are two inflicted conditions of destruction and repair: first, their visual presence is suppressed; second, their existence depends on the need for ever – present newness, which in return relies on technology. Heidegger in his "The Question Concerning Technology" describes technology not as a set of advancements but rather as underlying conditions within culture that prompt the development of technology²¹. Furthermore, as such makes those two becoming increasingly invisible, there is, as Graham notes, a widespread assumption of urban infrastructure as 'somehow a material and utterly fixed assemblage of hard technologies embedded stably in place, which is characterised by perfect order, completeness immanence and internal homogeneity rather than leaky, partial and heterogenous'²².

This problem, namely of distorted dialectic between destruction and repair or holding off the interference of natural processes like decay, ruination or patination is especially emphasized in the context of modern city, and technologically altered landscapes. How is it that we 'are so often disconcerted, indeed even anxiety ridden, by landscapes of this type'²³, environments saturated by human endeavour, where rust, dust and decay creeps in inevitably. 'Such a question emerges, one might imagine, in direct connection with that of technology,



19. Heidegger's terminology describing one of the modes of being in the world. See "Being and Time" by Heidegger.

20. Stephen, G., & Nigel, T. (May 01, 2007). Out of Order : Understanding Repair and Maintenance. Theory, Culture & Society, 24, 3, 1-25.

21. Heidegger, M., & Lovitt, W. (2013). The question concerning technology and other essays.

22. Stephen, G., & Nigel, T. (May 01, 2007). Out of Order : Understanding Repair and Maintenance. Theory, Culture & Society, 24, 3, 1-25.

23. Picon, A. (2000). Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust.

since we are not disturbed by views of untouched countryside. These are places where nature seems to have obliterated itself or at least yielded to man-made artifacts'²⁴ . If we go back to the Guisborough's painting we might speculate that, should the landscape depicted was disturbed, invaded and overgrown, it would undermine the position of its landowners, the position of control over the land. Yet, it would most probably not disturb us in terms of its aesthetics, it would come closer to that of an untouched countryside. It, indeed, becomes interesting to wander about the possibility of redefining the dynamic between destruction and repair in the context of technological landscape. Can destruction and repair be used in a more productive and enriching way? Can the emergent space, between destruction and repair, take on aesthetics which help us learn about the world, rather than engrain certain ideas of stability? Lastly, could those become a visible and performative act which re-establishes our relationship with nature, reframing the normative basis of our society?

Wanting to embrace the broken world thinking and, as Steven Jackson wrote in "Rethinking Repair," "take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points"²⁵ we need to rethink what stability is and advance our appreciation for the aesthetics of repair, thus destruction. Act of caring for our environment, should no longer be concealed. We must also ask: how tools we use, which disclose the truth about our attitude towards aesthetics and shaming of the maintenance act, can be redefined? Trying to imagine what would be possible, we might well shift our attention toward art. Lets take, for example, Japanese art of repair – kintsugi, which echoes what can be found in primitive African societies, where broken objects were repaired several times, representing an incredible fusion of injury and repair—by repairing an object so roughly you actually leave the injury visible. On the contrary, what we see is happening now, in the modern art of plastic surgery and cosmetics, is constant strive to force the idea of the removal of injuries and marks on the body. Kader Attia comments on

24. Picon, A. (2000). *Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust*.

25. Jackson, S. J. (2014). *Rethinking Repair*. 221-240.





that through his artwork, for him, repair and destruction are essential. They are “an endless process of intellectual, cultural, and political adjustments that humanity carries on in parallel with its natural process of evolution.”²⁶ Erasing them or their visibility, endangers this very function of our being. But how defective objects or landscape are being restored, is very rarely commented on and, frankly, it rarely comes into a visible focus. Mierle Laderman Ukeles was the one to comment on the invisibility of the maintenance process and its workers. “It’s one of the funny things about maintenance, it’s almost impossible to see.”(Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 2008). In her practice she highlighted the overlooked instances of social production, job hierarchies but also questioned the nature and societal reasoning behind the maintenance. In the Manifesto for Maintenance Art she wrote: “Maintenance: Keep the dust of pure individual creation; preserve the new, sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement;”²⁷. As Graham indicated, what is being repaired, maintained, restored is much larger, it is the negotiated order that surrounds the thing.

26. Kader Attia on destruction and repair. See “In the Service of Repair: Kader Attia on Systems of Belief and ‘Reason’s Oxymorons.” by Robin Scher.

27. See Manifesto for Maintenance Art by Ukeles

End Note

Synthesis of the argumentation and discussion, contained in the previous chapters, gives a rough indication of the possible action to be undertaken on behalf of an architect or researcher. That is to say, if our incentive, as architects, is to reestablish how the constructed environment responds and integrates natural phenomena, we must question the way we operate as designers and how our practice is situated.

Natural phenomena, as it must have come across, have a broad spectrum. In this paper they have a wide range and are positioned on the side of destruction. Such is not necessarily undertaken solely by the non-human agents. Natural condition of any construction is to undergo a complex process of deterioration, which is being held off by the practices of maintenance and repair. Thus, if we want to redefine nature – architecture engagements, analogously we could target the dynamic between destruction and repair.

In our attempt to do the above – mentioned, three aspects can be addressed. Firstly, it is necessary to question how architecture is being represented. We can use such to imagine possibilities rather than solidify situated ideals. Representation can challenge the dynamic between destruction and repair by addressing the questions of instability, friction, flux and their productive potential. Secondly, by rethinking aesthetics. There is a well established idea of what is and what is not beautiful, repaired objects usually fall beyond those categories. What are the aesthetics of repair then, and what could they become? How could they serve and develop our understanding of the environment? Thirdly, by addressing the problem of construction and materiality of the project. Can architectural construct anticipate destruction and provide space for it. Can destruction be productive? In a sense that, through instigating the process of repair, it introduces new aesthetics and new spatial qualities? The moment we remove ourselves from the situated thinking, is the moment when the productive potential of the design is revealed.

Bibliography

Balmori, D., & Sanders, J. (2011). *Groundwork: Between architecture and landscape*. New York: Monacelli Press.

Bois, Y. A., Krauss, R. E., & Centre Georges Pompidou. (1997). *Formless: A user's guide*. New York: Zone Books.

Gan, E. (2014). *Rice Assemblages and Time*. World of Matter, Hartware MedienKunstverein (HMKV), Dortmund, Germany.

Corboz, A. (1983). The Land as Palimpsest. *Diogenes*, 31(121), 12-34. doi: 10.1177/039219218303112102

Corner, J., & S MacLean, A. (2000). Aerial Representation and the Making of Landscape. In *Taking Measure Across the American Landscape* (pp. 15-21). London: New Haven.

Foster, H. (1998). *The anti-aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture*. New York [NY: New Press.

Gissen, D. (2012). *Subnature: Architecture's other environments*. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.

Guattari, F. (2000). *The three ecologies*. London: Athlone Press.

Heidegger, M., Macquarrie, J., & Robinson, E. S. (1962). *Being and time*.

Heidegger, M., & Lovitt, W. (2013). *The question concerning technology and other essays*.

Jackson, S. J. (2014). *Rethinking Repair*. 221-240.

Kalof, L., Owens, M., & Wolch, J. (2017). *Lively Cities: People, Animals, and Urban Ecosystems*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*. : Oxford University Press. Retrieved 26 Jul. 2020, from

Lally, S. (2009). *Energies: New material boundaries*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Latour, B (1991). *We have never been modern*

Lecomte, J. (January 01, 2013). *Beyond indefinite extension: About Bruno Latour and urban space*. *Thinking with Latour*, 462-478.

Lee, P. M., & Matta-Clark, G. (2001). *Object to be destroyed: The work of Gordon Matta-Clark*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Marot, S. (2010, December, 10.) *Palimpsestuous Ithaca: A Relative Manifesto for Sub-Urbanism*. Frederick Law Olmsted Lectur. Cambridge, Massachusetts, US.

- McHarg, I. (1995). *Design with nature*. New York: John Wiley.
- Morton, T. (2018). *Dark ecology: For a logic of future coexistence*.
- Morton, T. (2019). *Humankind: Solidarity with non-human people*.
- Picon, A. (2000). *Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust*.
- Ruskin, J. (2008). *The lamp of memory*. London: Penguin Books.
- Samman, N. (2020, February, 23). *As We Used to Float – Iroojrilik*. Sonic Acts Academy 2020. De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Sample, H. (2016). *Maintenance Architecture*.
- Serres, M. (2011). *The natural contract*. Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press.
- Stephen, G., & Nigel, T. (May 01, 2007). *Out of Order : Understanding Repair and Maintenance*. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24, 3, 1-25.
- Tsing, A. L. (2017). *Arts of living on a damaged planet*.
- Verschaffel, B., Leach, A., Van Acker, W., & Mical, T. (2020). *Architecture and ugliness : anti-aesthetics and the ugly in postmodern architecture*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.