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## LANDSCAPE ART – A NEW DEFINITION AND NEW LOOK

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to propose a new definition of landscape art. By landscape art we mean all forms of art which refer to any landscape and problematize it, i.e. subject it to artistic analysis, interpretation and intervention, both in a formal and aesthetic, as well as critical sense. Landscape art understood in this way would not be a separate direction or trend in art and would not form a coherent artistic concept. In the article we indicate the current understanding of landscape functioning in the field of art and the reasons why the new definition is useful.

**Keywords:** art, art theory, landscape

### 1. Introduction

It is difficult to imagine the history of European art, especially modern and contemporary art, without landscape. It not only constituted the background in paintings and, in time, also a separate painting genre, but was also the object and the result of gardeners' and architects' work. However, it definitely lost its significance in this respect with the dawn of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> In many

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. K. Clark, *Landscape into Art*, J. Murray, London 1949; M. Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

respects, this is still the case today, although a recent change in the art's approach to landscape has taken a very promising turn. This change entitles us to re-define the role of landscape in art or, to put it differently, to redefine landscape art. The aim of this article is precisely to present such a definition.

It may be seen as a kind of a historical paradox, in a narrow sense confirming Hegel's thesis on the death of art. It seems that, after centuries in which landscape was a phenomenon *par excellence* artistic (in the sense that it was art that constituted a sphere where the idea of landscape found its articulation), this role was gradually taken over by science.<sup>2</sup> At first, the category of landscape became of interest to geography and, at the turn of the 21st century, also to archaeology, sociology, cultural studies, etc. – disciplines which were generally referred to as "landscape studies".<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, the artistic provenance of the landscape idea is still evident. It is because some indicate that it would be beneficial to remove it from science, precisely due to its accompanying connotations, despite voices questioning the still quite common belief that it originates only in the field of art. In the case of sociology or cultural studies, it is pointed out that the categories of place or space are much more cognitively fertile. It does not change the fact that the term landscape has now become a permanent feature, not only in a contemporary reflection on the natural and human environment, but also in various legal documents, such as the European Landscape Convention adopted in 2000. At the same time, it should be clearly stated that even the supporters of using this category point out that its artistic roots may yield unwanted fruit in the form of an aesthetic approach to landscape.

It seems that the perception of landscape resulting in a cautious approach towards it, as well as reservations about it, is also present in contemporary art and art criticism. Landscape is associated not so much with the great tradition of modern painting, which found its culmination in Impressionism, but rather with 19th-century *Landschaft*, i.e. with naive and kitschy representations of natural scenery. As a result, when it comes to painting, it appears to be a subject characteristic of amateurs, possibly "daubers" who paint for tourists or, at best, artists who consciously take the path of traditional art. On the other hand, when we talk about photography or landscape architecture, i.e. two areas close to art in which landscape still plays an important role, it is not infrequently emphasised that they are close to art, but not identical with it. Landscape photography today is associated with "National Geographic" rather than, for

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<sup>2</sup> A thesis similar to the one above, but formulated with reference to garden art, which was to give way to land art, is put forward by S. Ross, *What Gardens Mean*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1998.

<sup>3</sup> *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, eds. P. Howard, I. Thompson, E. Waterton, M. Atha, Routledge, New York 2013.

example, the Kielce School of Landscape. The same is true for landscape architecture, which is often identified with the design of home gardens or urban spaces, i.e. with activities of aesthetic, but essentially technical value. A specific aversion to the idea of landscape in the 20th- and 21st-century art world may be evidenced by the fact that it was referred to using various labels which did not pertain to the idea of landscape: *earth art*, *eco art*, *environmental art*, or *land art*, although it became an important element of artistic activities in the second half of the 20th century, in many respects more important than ever before.

There are at least two related reasons why these trends are not associated with landscape. Firstly, landscape in art is usually thought of as a representation, while the works of land art or environmental art were typically *in situ* actions. Secondly, these works are characterised by a critical dimension understood in one way or another, problematizing the issue which they refer to, i.e. generally the (natural and human) environment and relationships between humans as individuals and a collective. Landscape, which seems to be "typically" expressed by landscape painting, from this perspective usually appears as a naive representation whose author is unaware of the hidden truth about people's attitude towards their environment.

## 2. Beyond the picturesque

It should be noted, however, that this way of understanding landscape, although sometimes still present both in art and science, is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. This is due to the landscape research mentioned above, which has resulted in much broader understanding of landscape. Generally speaking, landscape means the (natural, cultural) environment experienced (mainly sensually) by human beings, insofar as it is experienced by them and thus equipped with meanings and values. However, art itself also contributes to this. It is necessary to note a key change in avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art, which may be regarded as a contribution to this redefinition. It was, among others, the accompanying ideology of art, proclaiming e.g. the need to abandon museums and galleries in favour of urban or natural space (surroundings) for the presentation of art, which created the possibility for a work of art (however understood: as an installation, ephemeral work, sculpture, performance, or mural) to inscribe itself in the landscape, but also to refer to it. *Environmental art* and *land art*, part of public art at the turn of the 21st century and, at the same time, the developing critical art are closest to such an understanding of landscape art. It should also be added that land art and environmental art adopted natural surroundings as their main point of reference, often making use of vast open spaces where large-scale monumental works were created, clearly interfering with the existing landscape, transforming it permanently or temporarily

and subjecting it to the action of natural (atmospheric, geological, etc.) factors. Beginning with Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), land art was a form of spatializing an artwork in a natural setting using natural material (sand, stones, rock, branches, etc.) and atmospheric conditions. Works such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) or *Field of Lightning* (1977) by Walter de Maria belong to the canon of this trend. With time, reaching for the ideology of minimalism in terms of the materials and means used, land art began to take on new, more ephemeral and less monumental forms. They were often reduced to an artistic gesture, which was aimed at, to a large extent, integrating a work of art with its surroundings, as well as aesthetically, formally inscribing the cannon in the landscape, or even merging with it. This contributed to the fact that landscape in art ceased to be identified with the painting landscape.

The fact that the abovementioned works, as well as many other ones, are probably not primarily associated with landscape is due to the power of a semantic habit. Their landscape character will not be in doubt, if one were only to understand landscape in the way indicated above.

Changing, or rather extending the dominant way of thinking about landscape in the context of art, by adding to it some motifs that are pointed out today on the grounds of anthropology, humanistic geography, cultural studies and aesthetics, we can try to revive the category of landscape, bringing it out of "oblivion". It is a useful category for our reflection on art, both contemporary and older. It is because, precisely due to its aesthetic aspect, it is broad enough to contain various meanings and tensions that are crucial not only for the artistic presentation of landscape, but also for landscape itself.

Redefining landscape also makes it possible to propose the idea of landscape art, i.e. art that addresses the issue of landscape (even if it does not refer to this category for this purpose) in various ways and media.

The traditional definition of landscape as a purely visual phenomenon, reduced to quality and aesthetic values, narrows its understanding, just as its scope is limited by reducing it to what is natural. Its inalienable element is all that is cultural, that finds its social foundation and is shaped historically, resounding with meanings and images that give it meaning and value. Acknowledging the cultural nature of landscape shifts the centre of gravity towards what is social. However, it does not eliminate either the artistic or the natural, the sensual or the material – it only gives priority to culture over nature in the sense that Stanisław Pietraszko had in mind when he wrote:

"In one way or another, every landscape is <<cultural>>. It possesses this status not only because of its creative aspect, as an image of sorts, but in view of the very autonomous properties of human awareness which make landscape a relatively independent – in relation to principles of nature – foundation of human beha-

viour and underlie the separateness of the human universe, or <<culture>>, from a standpoint from which the concept of <<cultural>> landscape was derived."<sup>4</sup>

Such an approach reveals a double sense of landscape: aesthetic and cultural. As a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon, landscape is modelled within a particular culture and its accompanying strategy of understanding and perceiving the world, and thus it is subject to the same mechanisms as they are. Taking into account the historical development of art, it can be said that while the aesthetic sense of landscape was explored by modern art and some 20th-century art, the cultural sense of landscape became the main theme of the second half of the 20th century and the most recent art.

Such an understanding of landscape creates new possibilities for its interpretation, including seeing it also in the artistic works which it is not usually associated with, thus making it possible to propose the concept of landscape art.

### 3. Landscape art – definition

By landscape art we mean all forms of art (visual, conceptual, performative) which refer to all landscapes and problematize them, i.e. subject them to artistic analysis, interpretation and intervention, both in a formal and aesthetic, and in a critical sense. Landscape art understood in this way would not be a separate direction or trend in art and would not form a coherent artistic concept. Instead, its manifestations should be sought in various artistic areas, in individual works, actions or activities which, revealing the landscape sensitivity of their authors, are aimed at a broadly understood discourse: from a position that problematizes landscape or its aspects to one that aestheticizes landscape. Thus, landscape art would not be a mere representation of landscape, aiming at its representation, but would constitute a kind of a critical reference to it, its aspects and issues, expressed in the language of art.

The object of landscape art understood in this way would be both the values of landscape (e.g. biodiversity, cultural diversity) and its aesthetics, as well as related issues (ecological, social, political and other) in which every landscape is inevitably entangled and which shape it in one way or another.

Landscape art can therefore take on the form of a work or action, entering the existing landscape and adding new meanings to it, thus transforming (permanently or temporarily) its meaning or appearance. In this way, landscape art

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<sup>4</sup> S. Pietraszko, *Landscape and Culture*, trans. P. Trompiz, *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies*, vol. 1, 2018, n. 1, pp. 10-11.

is situated between an artistic gesture and public discourse. It is therefore an expression of artistic engagement which can be manifested in different fields of art (architecture, film, photography, installation, painting, performance, sculpture), its various directions (land art, environmental art, murals, etc.) and in individual works.<sup>5</sup>

The definition formulated above may also be applied to "traditional" forms of artistic expression having landscape as their subject (landscape painting, garden art, poetry) which inevitably include reflections on landscape, its meanings and values. However, here we are mainly referring to the artistic activities and works of the second half of the 20th century and contemporary ones. If we assume that it is not the "appearance" or "shape" of landscape that is the subject of art, but that it constitutes the starting point for diagnosing (and sometimes proposing solutions to) the problems responsible for its condition, then the tension between the representation noting the state of affairs and the critical reflection on it comes to the fore in landscape art of the last six or seven decades. There, the tension is an intentional element of the artistic conception and realization, even if, as has already been mentioned, the artists have not always consciously referred to the category of landscape at some stage of the creative process.

Although the proposed definition has a stipulative character, it essentially covers well-known works of art. If one wanted to trace the history of landscape art, they would simply have to refer to studies of landscape painting, landscape architecture, land art, ecological art, etc.<sup>6</sup> In our opinion, however, precisely because the definition introduces a new understanding of the term *landscape art* in a specific – even if not entirely clear-cut – sense, it allows a new look at the works and trends discussed in previous studies.

Given the complex meaning adopted for the purpose of this definition (reflecting, as it has been mentioned, contemporary approaches developed in the humanities and social sciences), the notion of landscape may constitute a framework which makes it possible to look at, from a common perspective, various works which otherwise would appear to be unrelated. For example: what does Stanisław Fijałkowski's painting *The Highway* (1971) have in common with the photographs *The Promised Land* by Tomek Sikora (2005) or *Journey to Nowhere* by Tomasz Wiech (2014), for example? Or: what is the relationship

<sup>5</sup> Here we use the definition proposed by Beata Frydryczak for the „Dictionary of Landscape Concepts”, posted on the cultural landscape studies website we founded and maintain ([http://studiakrajobrazowe.amu.edu.pl/vocabulary\\_tag/sztuka-krajobrazowa](http://studiakrajobrazowe.amu.edu.pl/vocabulary_tag/sztuka-krajobrazowa); accessed 01.07.2021).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, S. Spaid, *Ecovention Europe: Art to Transform Ecologies, 1957-2017*, Museum De Domijnen Hedendaagse Kunst, Sittard 2017; B. Tuffnell, *Land Art*, Tate Publishing, London 2006.

between Wojciech Zamiara's video performance *The Road to Truth* (1990) and Tomasz Tatarczyk's painting *Step by Step* (1998)? Multiple examples of this kind of juxtaposition could be mentioned.<sup>7</sup>

For all the differences that divide them, accepting that these are works that problematize landscape allows them to be confronted with each other. As a result, it is possible not only to grasp their peculiarities, but also to look at them in a new light which they cast on each other. Landscape painting, including modern landscape painting, has been different since artists started creating landscape performances. The idea of the picturesque took on a different meaning when ecological art began to be created.

The capacity of the proposed definition mainly results from the very broad understanding of landscape adopted in it, encompassing both tradition going back to the roots of modern landscape painting and one that could be called legal-geographical, thus including not only observational (visual), but also participatory and embodied approaches.<sup>8</sup>

Taking the notion of landscape as a point of reference also allows us to trace the transformations that the understanding of landscape has undergone not only in art, but more broadly in culture, or changes in aesthetic conventions. Owing to this, it is possible to look at various works as "stations" of the travelling concept of landscape to borrow Mieke Bal's term. In art, this travelling has an artistic dimension, but it has been taking place in parallel to the travelling of the notion of landscape in other fields.

If we look at art from the perspective of the travelling notion of landscape, it may turn out that art reflects the transformations of the very notion not only in the theoretical layer (connected with the changing scientific understanding of landscape), but mostly in the artistic one which reflects the transformations of landscape itself and also of our changing relationships with it. As a result, by using the language of art, landscape art comes closer to scientific approaches, confirming the validity of questions posed in science, to which it tries to find its own answers. It analyses not only the aesthetic layer of land-

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<sup>7</sup> All the works mentioned in the article can be found in our Gallery of Landscape Art on the website mentioned above (see note 5). It is a presentation of our selection of works by Polish artists who were active from the 1950s to the end of the second decade of the 21st century, fitting, in our opinion, the assumptions of landscape art that we have adopted. The gallery comprises three „sections”: works, photographs and actions, which are of an ordering rather than exclusionary character. It probably does not include many, especially recently created works, but the intention behind it is mainly to indicate a way of thinking about landscape rather than an enumerative way of presentation. <http://studiakrajobrazowe.amu.edu.pl/home/galeria-sztuki>.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. B. Frydryczak, *Krajobraz. Od estetyki the picturesque do doświadczenia topograficznego*, Wydawnictwo PTPN, Poznań 2013.

scape, but also related and connected issues that remain current in the cultural discourse, recognizing problems and posing key questions in the given existential, ecological, aesthetic, social, political and other, equally current situations.

#### 4. A look at landscape art

Looking at works of art from the point of view of the landscape allows us to see an important, yet often overlooked role of art. Alongside science and politics, it turns out to be an area in which interest in ecological and social issues is alive, in one form or another. However, as in the case of other issues, it offers a different perspective, often not obvious, but much more appealing to the imagination, because it corresponds to the aesthetic and cultural specificity of landscape.

Among numerous issues taken up by landscape art, we can point out some which are particularly strongly connected with the idea of landscape, especially with its double meaning, and at the same time show how far contemporary art is from a simple representation of landscape. These are: transformations of various types of landscape (e.g. natural and urban, degraded and aestheticized, industrialized and rural); identity of place (e.g. creation of a place at a hitherto "non-place", permanence of the *genius loci*, habitation), landscape of memory (e.g. recovering memory) and multi-sensory perception of landscape (e.g. landscape embodiment, topographic experience). The indicated scope of problems does not exhaust the possible references of landscape art to landscape itself and its idea. It is only an exemplary selection of issues most frequently taken up by art in recent times. The travelling nature of the idea of landscape makes it sufficient to change the optics in order for this range of issues to shift significantly.

From this perspective, one of the most important themes of art is the very aspect of landscape creation, i.e. the relationship between humans and their surroundings as a cultural space, inhabited and generationally transformed both in a civilizational and natural sense, as well as semantically. Hubert Czerepok's work *Ecosystem* (2014), which accentuates social experience born in landscape, can be a flagship example of this type of work. The motif of collective haymaking, people's relations to others and to landscape born thanks to work, is one whose origins can be sought even in Peter Bruegel's *The Harvesters* (1565) which became a contribution to the analysis of landscape as inhabited space. Behind this artistic vision there is an excellent interpretation of cultural landscape as space with a social and processual dimension, developed and marked by routine human activities subordinated to the rhythms of nature.

The entanglement of landscape in a multitude of different issues is particularly clear in urban space, where projects that can be classified as landsca-

pe art are much more often rooted in the stream of critical art which enters public space as a sphere of discourse and causes its temporary or permanent transformation by artistic means. It is difficult to be indifferent, for example, to the architecture which earlier became the subject of Krzysztof Wodiczko's works addressing key political and social issues, as their impact covers not only the object subjected to artistic intervention, but also its entire physical and semantic environment. Thus, their impact on public space is a transformation of urban landscape. Although artists use new technologies (holograms) much more frequently in public space and do not go beyond one-off actions, these works leave a permanent mark, at least in the viewers' consciousness.

Ecology also occupies a lot of attention of contemporary artists, whereby the artists not only show how destructively humans affect the environment, but also indicate remedies, referring, for example, to the idea of dialogue and care. This is how we can interpret, for instance, *Tomek Kawiak's Pain*, a work from 1970, in which the artist bandaged trees in the centre of Lublin, trimmed by the municipal services. This work can be considered one of the first ones to refer so significantly to the presence of nature in the city and its subordination to the "interests" of urban space. Today, a discussion on the so-called "concretosis" of the city dominates in this context, but the problem remains the same. In a similar vein, one can also understand Cecylia Malik's work *Polish Mother at a Logging Site* (2017) in which women breastfeeding their children occupied the stumps of trees that had just been felled. And here one common theme emerges: trees being cut down, pruned and destroyed in a climate crisis.

The issues mentioned here find particular expression in works or activities that require formal, ideological or semantic reference to a place and thus take on the character of *site-specific art*. Hence, the idea of place and its contexts significantly conditions landscape art. Many examples can be mentioned here, both in art and photography. If we go back to post-war art and photography, it is striking that their frequent theme was the degradation of urban space, particularly a city ruined during the war (Leonard Sempoliński), which in today's interpretation could be qualified as a landscape of memory. This is a recurring motif in a discourse on memory, both in theoretical deliberations and in artistic activity, beginning with Karolina Grzywnowicz's work *Weeds* which reconstructs the memory of a place and people inhabiting a village that no longer exists. Grzywnowicz transfers this memory to urban space, to an art gallery in the form of traces, as plants are mementoes in this case. Grzywnowicz's work *Grunberg*, referring to the historical landscape of Wrocław and its inhabitants, has a similar meaning.

The motif of the road, abundantly present in art (e.g. nomadism, the wandering Jew, a search for home, not being rooted), may be the opposite of art tied to a place, but one thing is certainly common: reference to landscape.

"The art of the road" is a project exploring topographic experience gained on the road, entangled in the changeability of landscape, obtainable only while wandering (however understood). This type of work may be found in various fields: from painting (Tatarczyk), through performance (Zamiara, Robakowski, Brzoska), to photography (Zjeżdżałka, Sternak, Rawluk). Therefore, it is not so much the medium that is a priority here, but the issue taken up by the artist, which becomes a key opening the possible landscape discourse. An analysis of selected works that belong to this area reveals yet another surprising aspect: these are not only thematically similar works, but they are dominated by an idea, an internal connection which proves the travelling nature of the notion of landscape – not so much in what is aesthetic but, above all, semantic and sometimes ideological.

As it has been mentioned, the above presentation is arbitrary and merely indicative. However, it allows us to become aware of a very important feature of landscape art. Namely, it is art which, by referring to various contexts in different ways, critically represents landscape as a sphere that is crucial for human existence, as humans can only exist in a landscape, whether they are aware of it or not – and they become increasingly aware of it also thanks to art.

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## SZTUKA KRAJOBRAZU. NOWA DEFINICJA, NOWE SPOJRZENIE (streszczenie)

Celem artykułu jest zaproponowanie nowej definicji sztuki krajobrazowej. Przez sztukę krajobrazową rozumiemy wszelkie formy sztuki, które odnoszą się do wszelkich krajobrazów, problematyzując je, czyli poddając je artystycznej analizie, interpretacji i interwencji, zarówno w sensie formalnym i estetycznym, jak i krytycznym. Tak rozumiana sztuka krajobrazowa nie byłaby więc wyodrębnionym kierunkiem czy nurtem w sztuce i nie tworzyłaby zwartej koncepcji artystycznej. W artykule wskazujemy dotychczasowe rozumienie krajobrazu funkcjonujące na gruncie sztuki oraz powody, dla których nowa definicja jest przydatna.

**Słowa kluczowe:** krajobraz, sztuka, teoria sztuki

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