05. NATURECULTURES

One

We start from the premise that landscape architects are interested in nature because they are concerned with the relations between humans and nonhumans. For many centuries this interest was guided by habits of thought and practices of making derived from garden discourse. Regulated and assisted by advancements in horticulture, husbandry, botany and many other practices which we now know as scientific, landscape architecture was also deeply influenced by aesthetic, religious and symbolic interpretations of the world (Debus 1978; Prest 1981). When natural philosophy developed into the natural sciences, landscape architectural discourse became even more influenced by what was going on in science, and its relationship with the natural sciences became both more pronounced and more intimate (Baridon 1998). A turn towards the sciences, however, was not a turn away from myth, symbol and aesthetics. In recent years a revolution in the philosophy of science has shown that the triumphal histories of science which based its endeavors on a formulation of truth that was to be progressively revealed only by advances in science, has been superseded by a more nuanced reading of scientific practices (Jardine 2011).

Two

In *The Politics of Nature* (2004) Bruno Latour develops a comprehensive attack on the division of the social, traditionally regarded as concerned with matters of value, from the realm of science, which has always concerned itself exclusively with facts. In the world of science there were objects (nonhumans like rocks and micro-organisms); in the world of society there were subjects (social beings). Planet Earth was neatly divided into two types of being, two types of knowledge, and two kinds of reality. The problem of science was how to explain natural objects in such a way that social beings (of which humans were the only class) could make sense of them. Landscape architecture joined in the game: its problem was how to construct a world for humans from the realm of objects (nonhumans were not regarded as part of the collective for which landscape architects worked; they were regarded as a separate constituency).

Three

Part of the problem, well-known amongst landscape designers, was how to develop a visual language adequate to their complicated subject matter. Latour argues that things have changed. We realize that it is dangerous and misleading to think in terms of two assemblies, science (fact) and society (value). We must, says Latour, get rid of the notion that there will always be two blocs, nature as it is and the representations we make of it. He suggests that the distinction between nature and society should be blurred, and that we should think of the inhabitants of the Earth as a collective of humans and nonhumans that are not considered epistemologically or ontologically distinct (Latour 2004: 41). This means abandoning the notion of nature and replacing it with the idea of naturecultures, an assemblage of humans and nonhumans. In doing this we still leave intact the two elements that matter most to us: “the multiplicity of nonhumans and the enigma of their association” (Latour: 41). Accepting this idea as a working proposition, landscape architects can concern themselves with where this collective comes together, and how the collective becomes gathered into a whole. It implies a search for what

makes up the common world. Instead of oppositional approaches to the gathering of humans and nonhumans, we can foreground the webs of cohabitation and encounter that landscapes comprise, permit and sustain. We can work on an account of human-environment relations that emphasizes the affective nature of human relations with the nonhuman and with other humans, in the context of constructed landscapes. We can consider, further, that landscapes encourage a subtle but passionate confrontation with what it is to be human in a constructed world. They do this by enabling specific kinds of encounter with other beings that share this world – such as bag ladies, weeds, and urban coyotes.

Four

While there is more than a single site for the collective encounter of humans and nonhumans in the constructed world, we will consider one that has concerned landscape architects in recent years: public space. The public realm may well, in fact, be the primary site of this encounter, if we extend the notion of the public to include nonhumans. An important consideration in the theoretical construction of public space as the primary site of human-nonhuman interaction is its operation as an assemblage, an open system, a multiplicity. Public open space is peculiarly sensitive to changing conditions, and changes along with these as it is continually constructed by its users. When we say that people construct space we can see by that very possibility that space is an active component of the social assemblage. Through the construction of space this assemblage can itself be constructed, or maintained, or challenged. And when we refer to open space we refer not only to the spaces of the city but all the spaces of our lives.

Five

In the contemporary urban realm the realization of new public space is not a matter simply of the establishment of a central plaza or core site. Public space now, as often as not, is distributed along multiple broken continua consisting of streets, parks and reserves, blurred terrains and riparian edges. Of course, this has always been the case, but these supplementary ribbons and patches were usually supported by a singular magnetic condition that encouraged a concentration of social and cultural capital at the intersection of significant urban flows. Now we find - in the towns, suburban precincts and urban fringes most people inhabit - that the spatial condition of civic freedom is a tangle of landscape structures whose role as public space exceeds their primary function as transit lines and water management systems. Public space is not only distributed and disconnected, but its potential as a collectively formulated civic terrain is obscured and ignored. The idea of an open civic realm was never high on the agendas of postwar suburban developers anyway. “To understand why public space is missing, Americans must remember that after 1945, most of the built environment was never planned or designed…” (Hayden 2006). Federal policies devised to stimulate the real estate and construction sectors of the economy granted private developers lavish subsidies without concomitant incentives to create well-designed residential neighborhoods, transit, and public space (Hayden 2006). With the current redevelopment of low-density residential tracts on the outskirts of cities -- and in the inner fringes as well -- we have the opportunity finally to build public space in the residential landscapes in which most Americans live -- the suburbs, the “outtowns,” the edge cities and the outer fringes.

Six

The old cores and inner precincts of many industrial cities are now semi-deserted or occupied by the urban poor, low paid and blue collar workers (perhaps filled daily with white collar commuters and then bled of diversity every evening and weekend). The low-rise business districts, apartments, and inner rings of genteel housing stock are continuing to empty out. In the once-great steel city of Birmingham, AL, for instance, a mapping study by the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham shows an almost continuous braided river of delinquent lots following the old incised valley in which the city was sited and along which the steel mills and worker housing subdivisions were laid out. Again, the opportunity to provide a new kind of public space is clear. The question is, for whom? What, or who, is "the collective" anyway? The very notion of community has long been problematized and now exists only as fabrication, or myth -- an essentialist vestige of 19th century social idealism. The concept of community is challenged, ambiguated. The identity or definition of (any) community remains open, like the idea of the site, as a scene of political struggle.

Seven

The common notion of the community as a coherent and unified social formation has been put in question by the work, for instance, of feminist social theorist Iris Marion Young and the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (Young 1990; Nancy 1991). Nancy, in particular, proposes that the idea of community is necessarily unstable and "inoperative," enabling us to think beyond formulaic prescriptions of community and to open on to an altogether different model of collectivity and belonging. The ideas of shared purpose and shared meaning are no more than Orwellian thought-rules blasted out of loudspeakers atop cruising party political motorcars. The last twenty years of global interaction have shown clearly enough that the "we" who inhabits and manages the earth is no we at all. It seems pretty obvious now that the nonhuman portion of the earth is much more important on a global scale than the humans that have purported to manage it. Now, nonhumans have the greater part to play in the destiny of human life. Should we not agree with Latour that the collective, now, is an assemblage of humans and nonhumans, and that the idea of the public extends to animals, insects and plants?

Eight

The public realm offers an extraordinary venue for the unmediated assembly of beings or, as we should say, becomings. As urban terrain, public space is no longer a single and privileged stage for political activity, but a location of multiple intersections, an assemblage of naturecultures. This condition is not coded according to rankings of fact (science) and value (society), nor is it coded aesthetically in the sense of a realm in which civic images are indistinguishable from general image-making (the hallmark of our consumer society). It is not a mix of social programming and private consumption. Instead, and this is the challenge for landscape architecture, public space becomes a designed realm in which the assemblage of humans and nonhumans is made visible and vocal. New conditions for the organization of public space are required, conditions far-from-equilibrium characterized by a kind of collective imaginary, a collocation of humans and nonhumans searching for whatever it is that makes up their common world. The public landscape becomes a terrain of encounter, a place where a collective of humans and nonhumans is *articulated* (to use Latour's word). To articulate the collective -- to work inside the notion of naturecultures -- the landscape architect must be tuned to the habitus of each party that composes the collective. An individual's primary habitus is the durable,

transposable system of affiliations and correspondences acquired by that individual as a result of the conscious and unconscious practices of families. Subsequently this is transformed in to a secondary or tertiary habitus by the individual's passage through different social institutions. (Bourdieu 1972: 56). The habitus is both structured and structuring, and it develops their possibilities of endeavor, and of freedom of endeavor. The designer of collective terrains successfully articulates the assembly of species that inhabit them when he or she mixes these parties while retaining and enhancing their freedoms. The degree to which the landscape is truly public is the degree to which potential trajectories and empowerments may be realized as a result -- the degree to which the individual party's habitus is acknowledged and brought into sensitive, practical and mutually beneficial encounter with that of others. A landscape that abandons the division between nature and society includes all conditions necessary and sufficient for the ongoing self-organization of the assemblage. To do this it is necessary to explore the common worlds of the collective, not in the sense of a unified march into the future along a line of time, but by means of enabling the formation of intricate attachments and affordances between and among species and elements through affective contact and inter-affirmation. The landscape architect who works for and with the republic of human and nonhuman naturecultures envisages life as a contingent process of growth and change. He or she participates in this movement of perpetual differentiation through the invention of forms that bring tree, child, rock, sky, bee, cat, schoolteacher and butterfly into equivalence and association.

Nine

Public space, then, is the location of encounter and negotiation between constituencies that not only speak different languages but for whom life is a variable that often means nonliving. Who amongst humans speaks the language of rocks? Who, now, is brave enough to declare that rocks do not speak? That rocks cannot enter the discussion; that minerality is a mute condition? Public space is no longer simply spatial. Nor is it simply terrain. It is, as well as being a physical, material place, a non-physical site of assembly and interaction. These conditions merge when physical and virtual intensities intersect, as in the occupation of Wall Street, a gathering whose center was everywhere and circumference nowhere, across a landscape of transmissions and receptions that are material and spectral, intensive and metric, coagulant and dispersive.

Ten

In order to build this realm we need an account of generative or operational strategies that enable landscape architects to work in such a way that the communities they serve may be engaged and empowered in the process. But first we need a manifesto. Something like this ten point guide? A truly sustainable public realm will be one in which difference is not only tolerated but is productive of difference; where the pressures of control and appropriation, consumption and politics are negotiated, enabled and carried out in a democratic manner by those who constitute the democracy; where safe, transgressive practices are not repressed or discouraged; where flexible and non-exclusionary cultural and social life is enabled. In conditions of natureculture, the human and nonhuman publics who construct the assemblage will be trusted and trustworthy. Species will be enabled to coexist and all species will have access to the resources that sustain them, just as earth-created nonhuman objects and processes will not be destroyed and natural systems not be compromised by development. The urban realm is not

solely a human realm – it is a collective realm where the collective is an assemblage of interacting species, objects and processes that support biodiversity and the difference it implies. This space will always be vague, and ambivalent, and open to the sky under whose impenetrable and indiscernible operations the drama of life on earth can be both enacted and witnessed by all.