

The Accidental Beauty of the Productive Landscape

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The Midwestern agricultural landscape is a tapestry shaped by natural and artificial forces. From above, patterns of use manifest through grids, infrastructural lines, and irrigation circles, superimposed with other natural or manmade features. These patterns can be seen as expressions of our cultural values: layered compositions of regulation, agricultural production, and environmental conditions. Aerial imagery captures the complex interaction of natural and human logics by taking these patterns, formed without compositional intention, and presents them as cultural artifacts.

This paper seeks to probe these accidental compositions as objects of reflection through the investigation of the production of aerial imagery, the adoption of landscape patterns in both art and architecture, and the exploration of these superimpositional techniques. Of particular interest are art and architectural practices that explore the tense relationship between man and environment through a reinterpretation of the captured landscape.

Works by artist Andrea Zittel, photographer David Thomas Smith, and visual effects artist Aydin Buyuktas are considered as case studies that provide a critical context for the author's public art installation, 36.9°, -89.6°. This project reinterprets the forms and patterns of the Midwestern agricultural landscape as a field of play. This installation, comprised of portions of discarded carpet, is inhabitable as drawing, surface, and representation of the landscape of Southeast Missouri. Here, the aerial landscape is a composition of values, and, applied to a vertical surface presents those values in a new light.

INTRODUCTION

The ever expanding proliferation of aerial imagery has altered our view of the world.¹ Information technology has adjusted the relationships between space and time, data and materials. Increased access to these images through Google Earth's satellite imagery and drone photography not only emphasizes the aerial view, but has the potential to broaden our understanding of our complicated relationship with the landscapes we inhabit. Geometries of regulation², characterized by

grids and patterns of development only disrupted by natural elements, are visible solely from above. This privileged view exposes facets of the land previously unseen, while revealing the effects of a human altered landscape.

Google earth presents images of the landscape, compiled from a database of satellite photography. Cities and towns, roads, forests, buildings, lakes, rivers and oceans are depicted as a seamed mosaic made up of photographic images of the Earth's surface. While not a novel way to see the world, as airflight and drone vision also provide a view from above, Google Earth and Google Maps integrate satellite imagery with geolocational data filtered for consumer navigational purposes.

Navigation apps and other forms of digital wayfinding or mobile navigation technology have transformed how we move around our cities. People have grown accustomed to assessing aerial imagery with an increased level of detachment. This state of detachment does not translate to spatial thinking or an actual understanding of the landscape. The lack of spatial context reduces the understanding of the landscape to simple pattern recognition. However, if we understand this in a more pluralistic sense, we can hope for a more holistic view of the landscape; informed by both our individual spatial consciousness and the collective spatial representations provided by satellite imagery.

THE AESTHETIC IMPACT OF THE AERIAL VIEW

Parallel to our understanding of a world oversaturated with images are contemporary art and design practices that use the technologies of surveillance and mapping to expose and amplify the growing impact of humans on the landscape. The work that results from these practices focus on the *Anthropocene*. This title, proposed by the research consortium Anthropocene Working Group, suggests that we are now in a new geological epoch "viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment."³

Over time, the ways that humans have encountered, experienced, and represented the landscape has shaped our perception of it. Before photography, mapmakers depicted landscapes and topography in flattened overhead views. Beginning with the elevated vantage points of Nadar's balloon photographs, to carrier pigeons, aircrafts, spacecrafts, and drones, the photographic view from above has been a

predominant method for capturing natural phenomena and giving it visual form.

Aerial imagery greatly influences how we both receive and project our sense of the landscape as a whole. Of the opportunities provided by aerial photography, John Brinckerhoff Jackson wrote:

It is from the air that the true relationship between the natural and the human landscape is first clearly revealed. The peaks and canyons lose much of their impressiveness when seen from above... What catches our eye and arouses our interest is not the sandy washes and the naked rocks, but the evidences of man.⁴

The grids, circles, squares, and diagonal lines of infrastructure that form the repetitious geometries that we see from above, were also aurally produced through surveys and urban planning. Aerial vision reveals the extent of the human impact on the natural landscape. It provides a view of places humans are responsible for but cannot see. This view of the manufactured landscape⁵, provides visual evidence of the magnitude of our intervention by bringing these landscapes into our consciousness.

Much like John Cage's *Musicircus* – a performance featuring multiple performers playing different music simultaneously – the disparate layered systems of production, regulation, and environmental conditions take form through the superimposition of multiple, sometimes unrelated logics. Our nuanced appreciation of the landscape not just relegated to the scenic, but it is a manifestation of complex and controversial forces.

FROM SCENIC TO CRITICAL

The New Topographics photography exhibition in 1975 ushered in a new approach to how photographers captured the American landscape. Images of suburban sprawl, industrial landscapes, and everyday life replaced the traditional scenic views of the natural landscape. Prior to the show, landscape photography was primarily characterized by the work of photographers such as Ansel Adams and his romanticized view of nature. In these photos the landscape was viewed as something beautiful, sacred, and serene. The New Topographics show focused on a landscape being taken over by civilization, creating a focal shift from pristine, unspoiled nature to the invading suburbs and development that represented the actual reality of the American landscape.⁶

As evident in media, art, literature, and film, the landscape is an agent ripe for inspiration as it permeates all aspects of our daily lives from the economy to politics to culture. In the following projects, each artists' work responds to an actual specific place and provides a commentary on human activity on that location. Through compelling and close experience with place, we can view the industrial landscape as a way of defining our

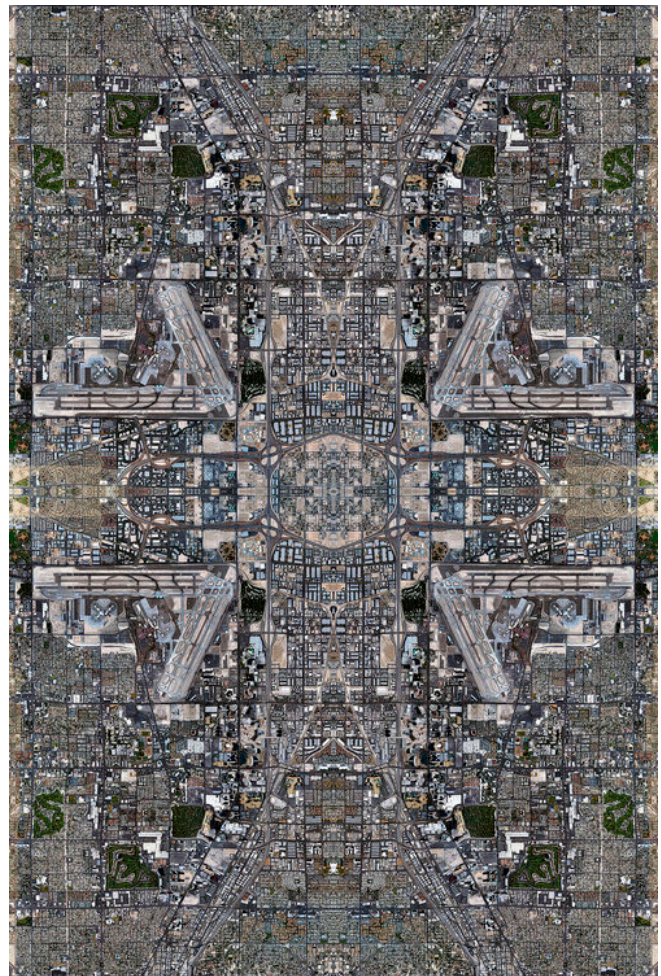


Figure 1. Las Vegas, NV, United States of America from the series *Anthropocene*. Courtesy of David Thomas Smith.

relationship with the natural world. Through this engagement, we can better understand how the character of a specific place can shape or inspire creative expression as well as culture. Almost entirely large format, the works by Andrea Zittel, David Thomas Smith, and Aydin Buyuktas amplify the qualities of the places they represent as well as their respective mediums.

CASE STUDIES

Andrea Zittel's *Wall Sprawl* images were created using manipulated satellite photographs of the encroaching human development on the desert of the American West.⁷ *Wall Sprawl (Next to Las Vegas Bay)* is comprised of multiple images of an industrial complex on the edge of Las Vegas. The imagery focuses on portions capturing the edges of urban development, or sprawl, as it approaches the open desert. These portions of the site are separated, repeated, mirrored, and tiled to compose a pattern reminiscent of a Persian rug. Just as urban development continues to encroach on the open desert, Zittel's patterns could repeat indefinitely. Here, Zittel offers a commentary on

the imposition of human development on the environment, by transforming highly-charged landscape imagery into decorative wallpaper. Set in the beautiful muted tones of the desert, *Wall Sprawl (Next to Las Vegas Bay)*, the monotonous architecture of the industrial complex is transformed into a mesmerizing kaleidoscope of shapes and colors. By turning the landscape into wallpaper, a layer of the interior, viewers are immersed in an environment in the landscape as opposed to on the landscape.

Similarly, Zittel's 2002 series, *Suburban Sprawl Studies*, were created using tiled satellite imagery. However, these earlier studies resulted in a series of lithographs where the photography was reduced to graphic patterns informed by the implied forms in the original images. In these studies, rapid urban expansion was transformed into a beautiful graphic. In the two-dimensional tessellations of the composite surface, the pattern is the organizer.

Like Zittel, photographer David Thomas Smith uses appropriated imagery to create his large scale, hyper articulated photographic works that call attention to socio-economic and political issues. In Smith's photographic series, *Anthropocene*, thousands of Google earth images of urban landscapes are collected and reassembled digitally (Figure 1). In describing his work, Smith references patterns and narrative motifs utilized by Afghan weavers.⁸ Recalling the symmetrical patterning of the woven tapestries, the satellite images are mirrored both vertically and horizontally. The large scale of the composite images as well as their flatness emphasize the carpet-like nature of the works.

As in Zittel's work, each of Smith's images refer environmental concerns specific to a place. *Las Vegas*, comprised of chaotically repeated and mirrored images of roads, buildings, and parking lots but very little natural elements, allude to the social and ecological impact of manmade structures, asking the viewer to examine the American relationship with consumption. The flattened depth and ambiguous scale enhance the viewers' detached reconsideration of otherwise known elements. The repetition of mirrored elements plays off the repetition within the landscape and yields a dizzying pattern of excess.

In both Zittel and Smith's work, the incorporation of satellite imagery alludes to their detachment; meaning and values can be assigned by various commercial, political, and cultures institutions to suit their particular agendas.

The photo series, *Flatlands II*, by visual effects artist Aydin Buyuktas also uses composite aerial photography to create large scale imagery, but rather than tiling and mirroring appropriated images, Buyuktas films scenes from above using a drone and then digitally manipulates the images into warped views of familiar landscapes.⁹ To create his work, Buyuktas photographs from various angles and then digitally stitches the images together. The resulting image produces the illusion



Figure 2. Flatland II, Nursery 120*176 cm (2017) Houston, Texas. Courtesy of Aydin Buyuktas.

of a curved landscape surface that bends the viewer's spatial perceptions of place.

In the photo, *Nursery*, the folding of the image focuses the viewers' attention on the symmetry and color of spaces in the photo (Figure 2). Like several of his other works, Buyuktas often photographs mundane spaces generally overlooked. In *Nursery* the flat planting grid and intersecting roadways appear to bend towards the sky, warping the viewer's sense of perspective. The manipulated landscape presented feels both familiar and strange.

DESIGN PROJECT

While the earlier case studies utilized photography as both the originating medium as well as the final, 36.9, -98.6°, the installation project undertaken by my practice, originated through Google Earth photography, and is recreated through a patchwork surface of discarded textiles (Figure 1). These textiles are given new life in this installation as a medium for focused attention.



Figure 3. 36.9, -98.6° pattern derivation diagrams, courtesy of the author.

The project began with the search – panning, zooming, scaling – for a photographic image of the Midwestern landscape. Specifically, a patch of earth with the requisite blend of intersecting landscape typologies; the gridded and regulated, the meandering hydrological, and the textured agricultural. At the coordinates 36.9, -98.6, Bluffton, Missouri, these geometries of production and cultivation merge, overlap and interrupt, defining a plutonic ideal of the Midwestern American landscape.

The image was digitally traced with vector lines resulting in a grid-like pattern of intersecting lines, occasional circles, arcs, and bisecting diagonals (Figure 3). The drawing was scaled to the size of the gallery and then printed as a template for large patches of carpet tile. Selected carpet tiles in shades of green, gray, brown and yellow were cut into the pattern of the landscape image and attached to a folded platform that curved from the center of the gallery floor and up the adjoining wall.

Similar to Buyuktas' Flatlands images, the curved platform pulls the visitor into the image. Here, there is no horizon or sky, just ground as seen from the air. 36.9, -98.6°'s large scale tableau format fills the field of vision and facilitates a physical relationship with its viewers.

The application of the graphic carpet tiles from wall to surface presents the ground pattern, which is usually read as a coded active surface, into a vertical pattern. 36.9, -98.6° disrupts our traditional perspectival relationship with the landscape. We look at the ground continuously for safety and navigational purposes. Our relationship to the ground helps us to understand the body in space as it is the surface we are always in contact with. The presentation of the ground surface vertically, as we see commonly see signage media, is now read as information.

In the installation, there is a translation between the photographic and the graphic, much like Zittel's suburban sprawl lithograph studies. The geometries of the landscape are especially apparent through the use of the graphic textiles. The tiles are embedded with additional geometry – grids, hatches, lines, dots and patches – much like the textural landscapes they represent. The resulting pattern is a composition of shapes, lines and color. Our practice chose to work with discarded carpet tiles for the material of our installation both for the graphic and textural qualities as well as a reflection on the mass consumption overtaking our landscape. The carpet tile, a traditional interior cladding material, becomes a new layer of the interior, but with charged meaning as a representation of the productive landscape outside.

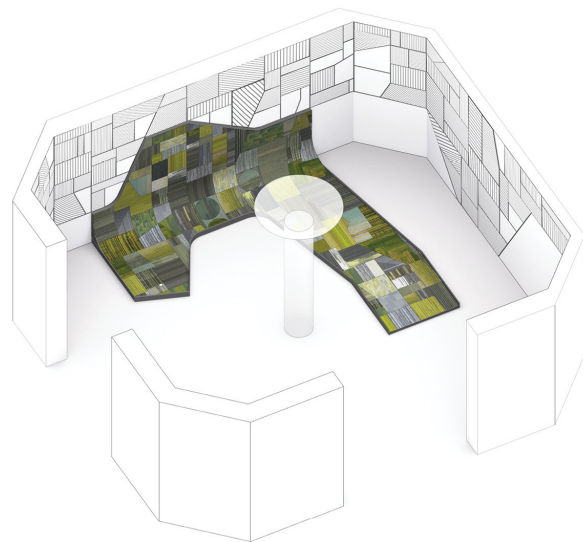


Figure 4. 36.9, -98.6°, courtesy of the author.

CONCLUSION

Each project presented can be appreciated solely for its compelling imagery, visible in their geometry, patterning, colors, and textures, however, the power of aesthetics can compel the viewer to reflect on their place in the world. Visual works, like the ones presented here, are crucial to our understanding of how the landscape is viewed, depicted and engaged.

In the Anthropocene, aerial imagery can provide a new method for illuminating the relationships between human activity and the natural history of the landscape. French philosopher Bruno Latour writes,

Because of the very logic of the Anthropocene, you are inserted into the phenomena you study in a way that is unexpected and still unfathomed. The idea of a science that emerges from the dispassionate study of external phenomena is now much more difficult to sustain. The very distinction between the social and natural sciences breaks down, because the argument that you are not supposed to be involved in what you study can no longer be maintained.¹⁰

The view from above provides evidence of our strained relationship with the earth we inhabit. The increasing focus on aerial imagery in art and design reflects an attempt to deepen our understanding of this relationship. The optimistic agenda of these works is not just the improved understanding of this condition but the motivation to reconcile the disparate forces manifest in each of these pieces.

ENDNOTES

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