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Installing the landscape: *The National Tourist Route Project* as aesthetic practice

This study addresses the issue of experienced landscape, transposing the discussions of representation and production of the landscape onto contemporary landscapes and landscape design projects. It investigates the borderline between nature, landscape design, and art, and explores what conceptions of nature *and* culture are being transmitted or produced in specific works of landscape design. The project investigates contemporary landscape design within a line of aesthetic discourses ranging from the picturesquely informed theories of Henry Whately to modernist conception of formlessness as this unfolds within sculpture and land art.¹

Contemporary landscape theory often considers landscape design a productive activity in a literal sense. Theorists such as James Corner, Marc Treib and Christophe Girot, all regard landscape design as a cultural agent and landscaping as an innovative means to critically intervene into cultural habit and convention.² However, few contemporary landscape studies highlight the relationship between landscape design and human experience – the experience of form as well as of the interconnected relation of nature and culture. Exploring such relations has almost exclusively been a literary preoccupation, like Chateaubriand expressing the 18th century angst for the wilderness and the comfort of the cultural landscape, or Diderot explicating the similarities between scenic landscapes and painting, thereby enforcing the pictorial landscape of the enlightenment. Based on the belief that literature conceptualizes essential aspects of the landscape and our experiences of it, this study invites literary theory into landscape theory.

The project takes as its main empirical material *The National Tourist Route Project*. The Norwegian Public Road Administration are establishing 18 roads throughout Norway as designated scenic byways, inviting architects and landscape designers to design road-posts, view-points, pathways and various other facilities.³ The road project seems to be choreographing bits of Norwegian nature, making it available to view, thus allying itself in to an 18th century tradition for panoramic nature. Like Saunder & Wilhelmsen's dramatically cantilevering viewing platform over the Aurlandsfjord, Stegastein, many of the *Tourist Route* installations seem simply to frame nature, continuing and heightening the pictorial landscape tradition discussed above.⁴ And yet, the relationship between the viewer and the landscape established by these projects is a complex one, begging questions concerning both aesthetic experience and epistemological impact. The study undertakes a multifaceted investigation of these questions, looking at the "aesthetic" dimension of the road itself as well as at the aesthetic and epistemological nature of the roadside landscape. Three aspects are particularly important to the study: 1) Accessing 'wild' places, the tourist roads offer us contact with what John Dixon Hunt calls 'first nature', nature seemingly untouched by human intervention.⁵ However, many of the installations draw the attention *away* from the scenery, onto the viewer's physical experience of being launched into nature. By consciously involving bodily sensation, the projects are hinting that the sublimity of the landscape experience no longer is located in the representation of landscape, but in the body of the beholder. Contemporary landscape design, then, calls for a notion of the landscape and our experience of it as a dynamic, interactive process rather than a fixed display in the picturesque tradition. This is one of the challenges to which the study attempts to respond. 2) Aesthetic roadside practices bear an implicit reference to non-designed roadside areas; the formless matter of 'regular' roadside landscapes – road cuts, fjord-sides, mountain-plateaus. The project investigates how the *Tourist Route* installations place themselves, both formally and experientially, in relation to formless nature and art. This involves looking into operative concepts from land art and recent landscape theory, for instance Robert Smithson's concept of *site*, defined as an unframed section of land,⁶ or Christophe Girot's recent concept of "black

¹ Whately, Thomas: *Observations on Modern Gardening*, Dublin, London, 1770.

² J. Corner (ed.): *Recovering Landscape*, op.cit.

³ Some of which are presented in the catalogue *Detour: Architecture and design along 18 National Tourist Routes*. Ed. N. Berre, Oslo: Norsk Form 2006.

⁴ For a picture of Stegastein, please visit this page: http://www.norskform.no/default.asp?V_ITEM_ID=2269. K. Grillner's *Ramble, linger, and gaze: dialogues from the landscape garden*, Stockholm: KTH 2000 provides inspiration when developing this perspective.

⁵ J. Dixon Hunt: *Greater perfections, the practice of garden theory*, op.cit., p. 57.

⁶ R. Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, Jack Flam (ed.) Berkeley: UCP, 1996, p. 153.

holes": "the in-between scenes of landscape beauty", areas that we have become experientially accustomed to as "natural", though unimpressive, landscapes.⁷ Both land art and the modernist *negative sculpture* have a capacity to mediate between the constructed and the non-constructed, between nature and culture, often seeking to frame and mark matter and nature *as* meaningless, random and insignificant.⁸ The project seeks to explore the suspended appearance of nature as matter in recent road works, and to consider aesthetic experience *en route* in relation both to the moving views and bodily presence of car-driving, and to 'ordinary' non-aestheticized sites and sights.

The Tourist Route Projects offer a unique possibility to work with a material in progress, allowing the study to take into consideration not only the finished work but also the *process* of designing.⁹ Situating these processes within a contemporary aesthetic discourse, the study poses questions such as the following: To what degree do the tourist road projects seek a world outside of cultural confinement, and to what degree do they answer man's basic longing for an unmediated nature? Are they merely "architecture on display" as some critics argue, or do they indeed offer a fruitful prism for understanding our relation to nature and landscape in the 21st century? The project seeks to employ these hermeneutically informed questions of form, nature and existence to contemporary practices that are integral to daily life.

7 C. Girot, "Vision in Motion: Representing Landscape in Time" in *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Waldheim (ed.), Princeton AP, New York, 2006.

8 R. Krauss, "Sculpture in the expended field", in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other modernist myths*, MIT Press, Mass, 1985.

9 A work which elegantly frames the possible perspectives of this study is Snøhetta's construction of a Peter Dass Center at Alstadhaug in Nordland. This project marks the landscape in a radical manner, cutting straight through a mountain with a diamond saw. This mark is at present left open, begging the question whether a phase in a construction process may be regarded an extreme work of art?