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Ecologies of the Object

This paper has evolved out of my current doctoral research project investigating the continuing significance of landscape as a subject of representation in the visual and applied arts. Landscape, in the context of this research, becomes a pivotal term for thinking through a number of interrelated concepts concerning ecology, technology and 'nature', and it offers a site (or sites) for re-thinking how spaces are produced, organised and re-produced through shifting relations of power and through shifting cultural formations.

Engaging with landscape at this point in the twenty-first century means acknowledging the effects of anthropogenic climate change as the environmental impact of global warming accelerates, resulting in an increasing fragmentation and reorganisation of the geophysical and geopolitical terrain. It also means acknowledging the new technologies of perception that exist from personal computing devices to global satellite systems, and considering the impact of these technologies on the landscape as both material site and in terms of their shaping of contemporary perspectives/sights.

This focus on landscape has developed from a belief in the political urgency of ecology as *the* question of the global present. Landscape as a subject of representation has a long history in relation to the visual and applied arts and my research aims to investigate whether it can offer critical significance in examining conditions of power in the context of twenty-first-century late-capitalism and the rise of 'technocapitalism' (Suarez-Villa 2009) as a new driver of social, cultural and political space. In considering these shifting notions of space and the urgent need for what the critic Timothy Morton refers to as an 'ecological thought' (Morton 2010), I intend to argue that, if we are to meet the challenge of our rapidly changing environmental conditions, then we need a radical repositioning and redrawing of existing discursive and representational territories and that visual arts practices, including craft, have a significant role to play in this process.

Morton's writings on ecology focus on the continued use of the term 'nature' in discussions of the

environment. He argues, following a growing number of recent philosophers from Bruno Latour (1993, 2004) and Michel Serres (Serres and Latour 1995) to those associated with the field of object-oriented philosophy and a number of feminist environmental thinkers (Plumwood 1993; Merchant 2003), for the need to break down the ontological distinctions that have been drawn philosophically between nature and culture and the human and nonhuman, for example. This challenge is seen as a necessary precondition for thought to be able to generate new political and epistemological environments where the idea of any political 'constitution' might open up to include nonhuman 'actors' and their relations with both humans and other nonhuman actors. Within this philosophical framework 'ecology' can do without a concept of a thing 'over yonder', called nature, which is 'an arbitrary rhetorical construct, empty of independent, genuine existence behind or beyond the texts we create about it' (Morton 2009: 22).

It is through this separation that 'nature' has become idealised as an independent realm that is somehow free of the social and cultural world. Nature in this sense is idealised and it is this picture that is frequently called upon in environmental politics which presents a holistic view of the environment/planet that aims to persuade us of our ethical obligations to 'preserve' or 'conserve' the natural world as it exists (or might exist) independently from us. Perhaps nowhere has this separation and idealisation taken place more fully than in the field of the aesthetic. Morton argues that this thinking about (and representation of) the natural world has continued to permeate contemporary structures of thought and prevents the possibility of moving beyond 'the constant elegy for a lost unalienated state, the resort to the aesthetic dimension (experiential/perceptual) rather than ethical-political praxis' (Morton 2009: 23).

Too often, when the visual arts attempt to tackle issues of ecology they continue to 'split' nature off ontologically from social, political and technological processes and appeal to an idealised conception of nature as an untouched realm free from human

interference. Instead, what is being argued for in this paper is a move beyond this static, unchanging state towards practices that engage with territorialisations and deterritorialisations in ways that begin to disturb the signification of 'nature', 'landscape' and the 'environment' as stable terms. Focusing on a small number of contemporary hybrid objects that can be seen to blur the distinctions between art, craft and design, the discussion that follows will focus on the ways in which these contemporary objects repurpose historic forms and materials from the decorative and applied arts quoting an earlier decorative iconography drawn from the natural world to represent it in shifting and unstable ways highlighting, in the process, the political implications of 'how we produce nature and who controls this production of nature' (Smith 2010: 89).

W.J.T. Mitchell's seminal edited collection, *Landscape and Power* (1994), has made a significant contribution to contesting the meaning of 'landscape' as a neutral term used within the visual arts. In the introduction to this collection Mitchell discusses how the visual representation of landscape does not simply stand as a signifier or symbol of power relations but is 'an instrument' and 'perhaps even an agent' of cultural power that appears to be independent of the social and political realms of human action and interaction. In this reading he argues that landscape, as a cultural medium, 'naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable' (Mitchell 1994: 2).

The development of the decorative and applied arts in Europe from the seventeenth century have complex histories that are bound to issues of power through the rise of capitalism via trade and colonialism, and through the visual representation of landscape, race and otherness. Originating in China as early as the fourteenth century, blue and white porcelain, for example, found its way into the wealthy collections of aristocrats, royalty and the church in Europe in the following century as trade routes opened up and goods began to circulate. The Dutch East India Company, established in 1602, secured the sole right for the Netherlands to trade with China and began importing Chinese porcelain into the Netherlands and distributing it to the rest of central and northern Europe. The consequences of this early monopoly on acquisition and distribution contributed to the increased value attached to the product through notions of rarity and exoticism.

Mitchell considers whether the term 'landscape' might also be rethought as 'something like the "dreamwork" of imperialism' (Mitchell 1994: 10). He goes on to comment that:

Empires move outward in space as a way of moving forward in time; the 'prospect' that opens up is not just a spatial scene but a projected future of 'development' and exploitation. And this movement is not confined to the external, foreign fields toward which empire directs itself; it is typically accompanied by a renewed interest in the re-presentation of the home landscape, the 'nature' of the imperial centre. (Mitchell 1994: 17)

There was a growing fascination with the exquisitely observed details of the natural world that were rendered by the Chinese porcelain painters – birds, insects, flora and fauna, narrative landscapes with rocks, rivers, waterfalls, distant mountains and swirling clouds, borders of foliage, scrolls and unusual plants, all served to present an exotic world beyond the familiar landscapes of Europe. The unusual quality of the porcelain in comparison to European ceramics added to its value as a sought after commodity; it offered a remarkably refined material characterised by a paper-thin appearance and a transparency and luminosity when held up to the light, coupled with a physical robustness.

As imports of Chinese porcelain increased during the seventeenth century, the effects on European domestic ceramic production in the Netherlands and England were profound as they struggled to compete with and to emulate the qualities of the fine porcelain in both material and decorative terms. A domestic war in China in the middle of the seventeenth century, however, meant that imports of porcelain were seriously diminished, enabling a gap in the market for the Europeans to increase their production, refine their products, and to add new styles of object tailored to their domestic audiences – in addition to tableware, for example, the Dutch producers began to make intricate garnitures, vases, flower pyramids and garden urns, reflecting the growing interest in botany and gardening amongst the upper classes.

The development of 'Faience' in the Netherlands (also known as Delftware in England) meant that domestic European products began to rival the imported porcelain in quality and design. Initial European designs were heavily influenced by the Chinese style, but as the seventeenth century drew to a close

the Oriental landscapes began to be replaced by Dutch and later English landscapes, simple genre scenes and biblical subjects. During the eighteenth century, with the development of transfer printing techniques that enabled the mass production of decorated ceramics, new markets opened up with a growing bourgeois audience who were keen to purchase products previously associated with the nobility. Blue and white china achieved new heights of popularity and became a major factor in world trade (Carswell 2000).

In this brief overview of a specific example of an interior decorative product from its origins in fourteenth-century China to its mass production in eighteenth-century Europe, it is possible to trace a reference to landscape in both its symbolic form and in terms of its political and ideological significance. The idyllic landscape scenes that were represented stylistically on these ceramics reflect a changing engagement with landscape – both real and imagined – and with nature in general. Advances in science from the sixteenth century on contributed to a greater understanding of the natural world and an increased demand to harness, manage and control its forces for social, cultural and economic development. As the European powers extended outwards on their imperial quests for greater wealth, space and natural resources, the home landscapes also underwent rapid change in the light of industrialisation as large parts of the rural landscape were swallowed up by urban expansion.

There also emerged in this period of expansion a close connection between landscape and cartography, between military surveys and mapping, as the control and domination of spaces and sites became a significant element of state power and private property. The physical geographies of landscapes across the globe were drawn into a complex interrelationship with commerce and capital. From the raw earth used to produce the clay for ceramics, the plants used to produce the cotton and vegetable dyes for textiles, to the use of natural motifs in the decoration and the oceans traversed in their shipment and distribution, the ‘natural’ world became increasingly commodified. David Harvey’s analysis of capitalist forms of production and consumption is useful to this discussion. In his book *The Enigma of Capital*, he writes that: ‘What can be said with certainty is that the conquest of space and time, along with the ceaseless quest to dominate nature, have long taken centre stage in the collective psyche of capitalist societies’ (Harvey 2010: 158).

Across the decorative arts of the period the depiction of idyllic pastoral landscapes can be seen to present a view of man in harmony with his natural surroundings. Bucolic settings, vignettes of rural life with scenes of farms and animals, peasant girls dancing, children playing, men hunting and fishing were common, as were ‘exotic’ scenes and floral motifs drawn from the landscapes of the newly ‘discovered’ territories. What such landscape views and use of natural motifs as decoration can be seen to represent was a way of bringing the outside world in. Decoration was a means to tame and control nature – it offered a fixed reference point and a sense of stability in a world undergoing dramatic change and transformation.

The appeal of bringing the outside in through the use of the decorative arts has continued to hold an enduring fascination into the twenty-first century where traditional pastoral and exotic motifs continue to adorn ceramics, textiles, wallpaper and furniture. In light of this continued relevance of the natural world to the decorative, I now consider a series of recent objects that reference blue and white china and reflect on these pieces from a contemporary perspective arguing that, far from simply recycling imagery from the past, these objects appropriate their visual language to raise questions about our present.

Two contemporary designs that quote the tradition of blue and white ceramics can be found in the work of the Dutch designer Marcel Wanders and in the work of the Swedish design team, Front. Wanders’s *One-Minute Delft* from 2007 took a series of classic Delft tableware forms, fired them in bare-white porcelain and then hand-painted them in expressive brush-marks of blue glaze that were completed in ‘one-minute’. For Wanders, this gesture offered a way of combining industrial production with the handmade to create mass-produced objects that are also unique. The swathes of blue brush marks are entirely abstract in their composition yet, due to the iconic nature of the objects being painted, and the colours used, they start to take on a reference to the landscape genre with the suggestion of mountain peaks, rivers and trees and a sense of the scenic unfolding around the three-dimensional surface.

In another example of the use of the Delft tradition, the design team Front designed the *Blow Away* vase for Dutch firm Moooi in 2009 that took an original Royal Delft vase and scanned it digitally, using three-dimensional modelling software. This virtual vase was then subjected to a simulated blast of wind

and the animation of this event was then slowed down and the frames were isolated to enable the moment when the vase was 'blown' to be modelled again as an actual three-dimensional mould which was then cast in porcelain. Each vase is handmade and hand-painted and is, like Wanders's pieces, another example of the industrially-produced brought together with the presence of the handmade. In this example, however, the industrial aspect is also bound up with highly complex and advanced technological computer modelling. In a process that mimics the natural act of a gust of wind yet is in fact a simulation of that act, or a substitution for it, the distinctions between the natural and the artificial begin to blur.

Similarly, in Robert Dawson's work *Spin*, from 2010, the artist takes a ubiquitous blue and white Willow Pattern and, over a series of plates, enacts a gradual dissolution of the image through digital manipulation and corruption of the original pattern. These static plates give the uncanny illusion that they are in motion, in the process of speeding up. There's a witty nod to the movement of the potter's wheel here, yet the technology advances to defy the laws of human touch and time. The landscape appears to be out of control, spinning off the plate's surface, moving too fast for us to focus.

At first glance you would be forgiven for thinking that Francesca di Mattio's recent sculptural stacks combine found historical ceramic objects with hand modelling techniques but, in fact, the forms are all hand-cast, fired and painted in a complex and time-consuming process of mimicry and craftsmanship. In pieces such as *Sevres Vase à Bobèches* (2012) and *Milton Vase* (2011), forms and decorative detailing are referenced from various periods of ceramic history, only to be combined in an irreverent assemblage of different times, geographies and styles. The value systems that have accrued around these objects are disrupted as high and low forms are merged and the boundaries between priceless original object and kitsch copy collapse. In a number of di Mattio's works the objects appear to be undergoing a process of transformation or contamination, a self-devouring or engulfment by a neighbouring vase or the surface decoration that has taken on a life of its own.

In each of these contemporary examples there is energy and movement: a sense of entropy pervades the surface decoration or the form as the objects offer up landscapes of turbulence and fragmentation. These contemporary examples of historical precedent point to dimensions of contingency, disorder and randomness that might

be seen to disrupt the earlier historical project of understanding, dominating and reshaping the natural world, of 'fixing' nature and subjecting it to control and management by the human will. Nature, in these objects, is now represented as being in flux, in a constant state of change and transformation.

In Timothy Morton's discussion of ecological thinking he offers some hope for rescuing the aesthetic from its reification of the natural world and continuing to imbue it with political agency. He does this through his appeal to a notion of 'dark ecology', likened by Morton to *film noir* where the central protagonist is implicated in the very crime he sets out to investigate from a neutral perspective – the moral of the story being that 'there is no metaposition from which we can make ecological pronouncements' (Morton 2010: 17). Instead, we have to immerse ourselves in the crime, as the reality is – as many recent commentators on climate change are now warning (see, for example, McKibben 2010; Kolbert 2006; Parenti 2011) – that we are no longer *waiting* for the catastrophe to happen, it is in the very process of happening. Or, as Morton states, '*it has already occurred*' (Morton 2010: 17). Dark ecology is therefore 'a perverse, melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object into an ideal form' (Morton 2009: 195). It must work instead to reframe our notion of the ecological itself through a sense of openness to radical otherness, to that which cannot be easily assimilated.

Advanced digital technologies have entered the picture in these objects and they appear to be subject to a form of *acceleration*, whether by the presence of the hand (in Wanders's one-minute paintings), through the intervention of the computer (in Front's and Dawson's works), or through the pictorial conventions of the digital, where images are cut and spliced together from different sources and different historical moments (in di Mattio's sculptures).

The philosopher Paul Virilio has charted this process of acceleration in relation to the development of new technologies and the increased technological organisation of every aspect of contemporary life. Virilio links these developments to the military-industrial complex of late capitalism and its erosion of the lived space-time of human experience through the loss of our physical and material engagement with each other and with the earth. In this he echoes David Harvey's comments regarding space-time compression and the 'conquest' of space by capitalism cited earlier in this paper.

For Virilio, however, it is less a question of conquest than one of 'pollution' (Virilio 2009), a pollution

and a *crisis* of space that is brought about by the dematerialised, and instantaneous experiences of screen-based media. Digital media now enable access to local, regional, national and international sites simultaneously; territorial boundaries dissolve as one geographical location is caught up in another; distances collapse due to the compression of the near and the far, and Virilio concludes that:

Today it seems we live less in our own habitat (its field having practically disappeared) than in the habitat of velocity, assimilated to reality; its verisimilitude alienates us to the point of eliminating the optical effect of celerity, thereby normalizing the blurring of perception caused by acceleration. (Virilio 2005: 121)

For Virilio, it is our mode of perception and therefore the ways in which we encounter the world that are challenged. The speed of technology is contributing to a sense of fragmentation and ‘blurring’ of the perceptual field. Images are illuminated, colours intensified, the instantaneous ‘real-time’ screen reality supplants the ‘real-space’ presence of objects, places and people and our vision becomes saturated with a sensorial overload which is, in reality, a ‘sensorial privation’ (Virilio 2005: 37). There is a loss of material, experiential and *affective* engagement with the world and with others who inhabit that world.

This might be a moment to pause and to ask ‘Is it here, in this distancing from the experiential and affective engagement with the world, that we might find a role for craft processes and practices?’ I suggest this as a possibility, not in any appeal to a nostalgic notion of ‘authenticity’ in craft’s celebration of and immersion in the senses but in the increasingly hybrid role that craft practices and processes are playing in relation to other forms of aesthetic and cultural production. It is beyond the scope of the current paper for me to explore this suggestion in any more depth at this point. I want only to suggest that the distinction between the digital and the non-digital is too simplistic to hold as a binary in the present, as what happens in digital space is significantly affected by the material conditions and the social and cultural prescriptions of non-digital space. The development of contemporary craft practices into new areas of digital crafting and the appropriation of craft processes into other fields of cultural production are testament to craft’s ability to combine differing temporalities and modes of materiality simultaneously.

It is difficult to see the forces at play behind the new technological landscapes that we increasingly inhabit; their presence has arguably become as *naturalised* as the Imperial landscapes that Mitchell spoke of that I referred to earlier in this paper. Yet, the fight for the control and management of software licences and intellectual property rights, the virtual flow of information, and the social, political and ecological forces at work in the creation of the technology in the first place – from the labour used in the production of the machinery, to the rare earth minerals harvested for its internal mechanics, to the server farms that are running to store all the information being produced, the e-waste being generated on an exponential scale and the location of the factories and the labour producing the hardware (predominantly located in the Global South) – all contribute to new technology’s imbrication in a global restructuring of capitalism along transnational lines and to a renewed ‘conquest’ of space that might be referred to as a form of *techno-imperialism*.

I would like to suggest that the contemporary objects that I have been exploring can be seen to engage with these themes in their appropriation of historic decorative forms, many of which belong to the height of European colonial expansion from the mid-eighteenth through to the late nineteenth centuries. In reviving the forms and the symbolism of these historical antecedents, these contemporary responses playfully subvert their appeal to an image of the natural world as fixed, bountiful and untroubled and, in the process, call into question the self-evidence of ‘nature’ and ‘landscape’ as stable ontological categories. As well as the clear allusion to conditions of social and ecological collapse, these objects present us with a dark ecological vision that ‘refuses to digest the object into an ideal form’ (Morton 2009: 195), as Morton so succinctly puts it. Instead, it could be argued, in these objects what remains of ‘nature’ is corrupted and destabilised in a process that can be seen to mimic the co-option and corruption of landscape space by capital in its endless quest for new spaces to colonise and exploit.

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