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Dual Landscapes

In his poem *Ash Wednesday* the English poet T.S. Eliot begins says the following words:

*“Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are and
I renounce the blessed face
And renounce the voice
Because I cannot hope to turn again”.*¹

It was written shortly after the desolation of World War One, and marked a definite shift in contemporary poetic discourse, where beauty was no longer the reference nor the goal, what was sought after was rather the expression of a general incomprehension about our evolving world. Why am I speaking about this? Here we are in Southern Spain, the wars are long gone, and I am going to show you a few holiday pictures. The semi-arid coastal landscape of Andalusia is the natural habitat of the Mediterranean Fan Palm, or rather was its natural habitat, until the “plastic revolution“ occurred. The phenomenal transformation of the landscape in the last twenty years, roughly since Spain’s entry in the European Community, has produced a scenery and an environment that escapes definition. It is the product of an economic war, where the off-season production of fruits and vegetables for the rest of Europe has become the only objective. I will not delve on the political and economic consequences of this immense horticultural venture, nor on the extreme working conditions of its illegal labourers which drift-in from Morocco across the Alboran Sea on make-shift rafts. Many of these to-be workers never reach the land and drown at sea, only to wash-up at the Punta de los Muertos located on the small town of Carboneras. I just want to show and speak about what I saw: a Dual landscape inbetween manmade features and natural features. This new phenomenon defies the conventional rules of landscape perception and construction, it is in fact so artificial and unlike anything that I have seen before in terms of scale, that it poses a fundamental questions about the way we understand the world we are in.

*les routes sourdes perdaient leurs ailes
et l’homme grandissait sous l’aile de silence
homme approximatif comme moi comme toi et comme
les autres silences*
Tristan Tzara²

I am quoting Tristan Tzara like T.S. Eliot, because I believe that he represents a generation of Dada poets who tried to depict what couldn’t be depicted, and to express all the absurdity of our very own approximate world. Since this trip to Spain last summer my understanding of landscape as a tangible frame of refer-

1 Eliot, T. S.; *Ash Wednesday*, Collected Poems, Harcourt, Brace & Co, N.Y., 1935, pp. 109, 110.

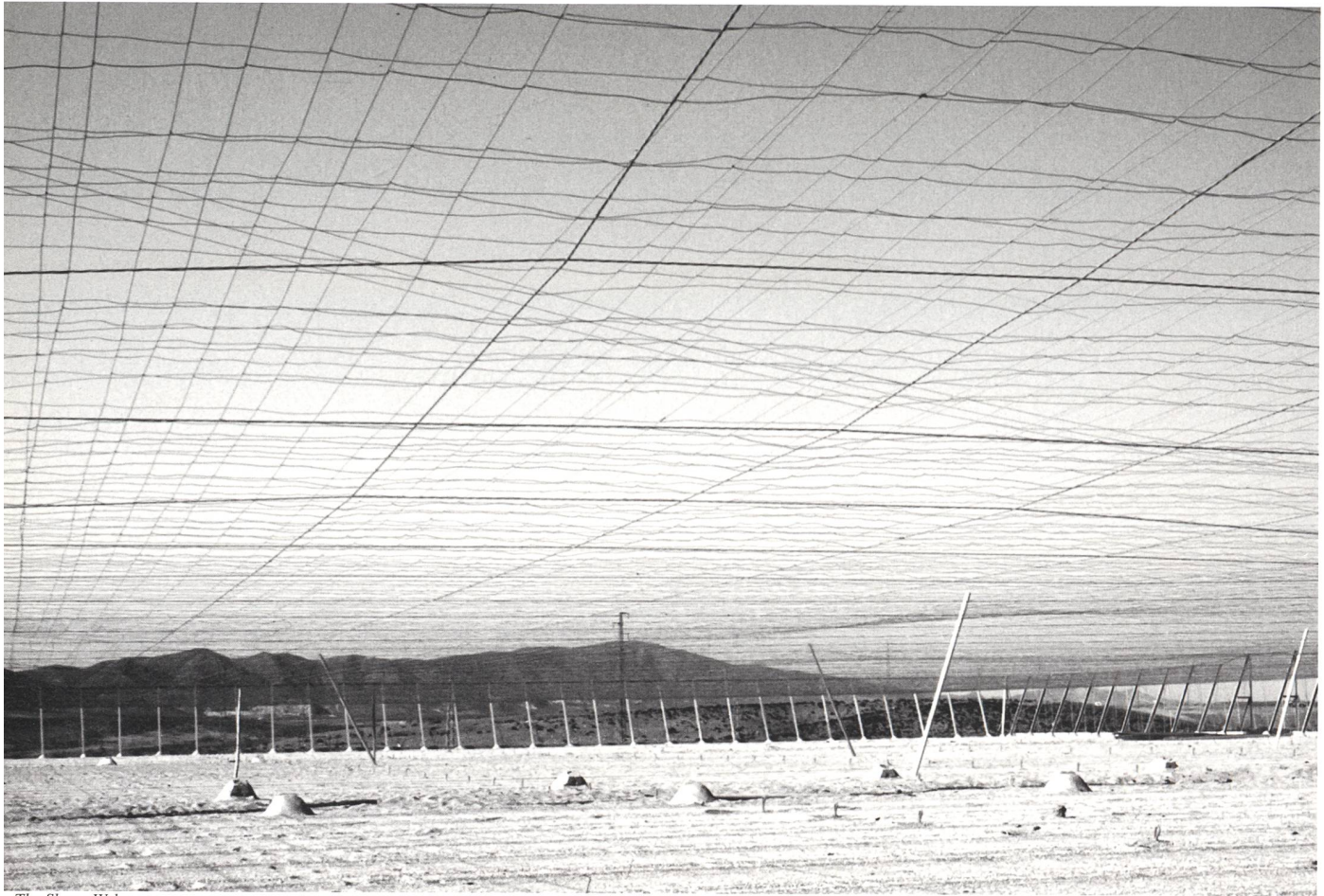
2 Tzara, Tristan; *L’Homme Approximatif*, NRF Gallimard, Paris, 1968, p.70.



Vinyl Scales on the Hills



Natural Fan Palm Biotope



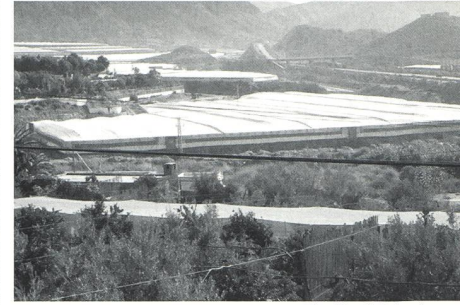
The Sky as Web



Inside the Membrane



The Sea of Vinyl



The Vinyl Suburb

ence for reality has shifted definitely. The “Plastic Coast“ is both a dual and approximate world, where what seems to be ground is neither ground, where what seems to be sky is neither sky, where the horizon all around is nothing but an extensive net of wires and membranes intertwined, where the movement of men and the growth of plants is kept all secret under a translucent shroud. At a geographic scale, it represents a one hundred kilometer stretch of territory in between Nijar and Motril along an eastern Andalusian coast almost entirely covered with flat polyurethane tents that stretch over tens of thousands of hectares. It is not beautiful, but it is truly phenomenal both in scale and complexity. The original ground is nowhere to be seen, and even the slopes of the adjacent *Sierra de Gador* and the *Sierra de los Filabres* are scathed out into immense plastic platforms. This is both a recent and most extraordinary landscape phenomenon, at time we could almost imagine ourselves landed on some foreign planet composed of a dual living system, inside the plastic membrane and outside in what remains of the original landscape. In fact this process of plastification has literally erased the entire existing landscape. All the traditional bearings linked to our understanding of a landscape scenery have changed. There is for instance no longer any continuity on the ground plane. The labyrinthian organisation of these immense fields of tents reminds one of a giant medina made of nameless plastic paths leading everywhere and nowhere. Inside the plastic realm, during the off season there is almost no trace of human activity, except for the finely raked artificial ground meant to accommodate hydroponic plantations. Within this daedalus of tents, even the sky becomes brittle under a tensile web of hair thin steel cables which totally fragment its very blueness. The horizon is no longer really exists as a backdrop, since it hides behind a thousand plastic screens. Even the towns and villages like *Roquetas del Mar* have given-in to this all invasive plastification. Some neighborhood squares and plazas have even vanished under such plastic tents, to become so many anonymous “Plaças Plásticas“.

C'est le réel dans la matière, la chose, qui a des caractères internes dont la détermination entre chaque fois dans une série de grandeurs convergeant vers une limite, le rapport entre ces limites étant d'un nouveau type (dx/dy) et constituant une loi.

Gilles Deleuze³

I will not delve for long on the complexity of Deleuzian discourse concerning the role of overlays and fringes in the environment. If there are new laws to be found on this landscape, they are certainly best expressed on the edges of things. The edge of the ground which is scraped and flattened irrespective of relief, it is the edge of the membrane which is almost continually closed and impermeable to sight and to life, the edge of the city which has become an unending wall of plastic, the edge of the sky which reaches down to an ocean of plastic membranes. I do not know whether we could generate some laws about this kind of environment as inspired by Deleuze's quote. It is probably more a question of the degree to which we look at a whole rather than its composite parts that matters. What is most surprising in this particular case is the extraordinary likeness and homogeneity of the all tent structures. There are of

³ Deleuze Gilles., *le Pli*, éditions de Minuit, Paris 1988, p.63.



The Landscape Membrane



Vinyl Horizon

course some generation differences between tents, and the first structures have started to break-down through the combined erosion of the wind and the sun. The decaying plastic membranes scatter pieces of plastic across the rest of the land, like so many dead leaves from some extraplanetary plant.

I know of no poetic text which relates the impression that I got while driving naively through this unending web of plastic membranes. In fact I did not know nor understand what I was looking at. Was it a building? Was it a landscape? Was it not rather a mutant structure in-between town and garden? The irony behind all this phenomenon is that the water, without which this environmental venture would be impossible, comes directly from the springs of the *Sierra Nevada*. The same springs that have provided over the past centuries, all the water for the Alhambra and Generalife gardens in Granada. Are we witnessing a new kind of Spanish garden, which is a precursor to many future gardens elsewhere? A garden of membranes cut from the outside world for the reign of economic necessity and hedonism without seasons. I believe that we are generally evolving towards a landscape duality, where things run either parallel to one another or become superimposed. The Andalusian example is only one case amongst so many others of mass environmental erasure and transformation of natural and cultural landscapes.

“The way human beings see themselves in relation to nature is fundamental to all cultures; thus the first fact of architecture is the natural world, the second is the relationship of human structures to the topography of the world, and the third is the relationship of all these structures to each other, comprising the human community as a whole.”⁴

What interests me in the Andalusian case, rather than moralising about our perfidious consumerist world, is to understand clearly how we go about framing the reality of such a landscape. What are the significant features and how do they organise themselves in space? How does such a phenomenon translate in other contexts? We must admit that our modes of perception and representation of landscapes are still rather conservative, and the dismantlement of such icons, is finally much more difficult than one would like to accept. A landscape is composed of a myriad of small human interventions scattered across the land, the phenomenon is first and foremost about working the land, and then finally maybe about dressing the land as a whole. The first Andalusian tents were built by poor peasants on the poorest public lands; at that time, twenty years ago, the surrounding landscape was considered as absolutely worthless. Today the commercial value of each hectare of this plastic Elodorado can be counted in hundreds of thousands of Euros. Inversely, the value the original natural arid landscape has increased, because it is simply disappearing under an ever spreading plastic membrane. Our understanding of landscape is often dual, and it is difficult to look at one side separately from the other. After this trip to Spain last summer, there is no doubt that my understanding of landscape as a duality has been confirmed, nor will I ever see or eat winter tomatoes and strawberries from Spain the way I did before.

4 Scully, Vincent; „Architecture: The Natural and the Manmade“, Denatured Visions, MOMA N.Y., 1994, p.7.

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Dead Skin - Plastic Decay



Vinyl Corridor