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The Fashioning of the Land

Dana Hargrove

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The Fashioning of the Land

Dana Hargrove, Rollins College, United States of America

Abstract: The apparently innocent space that is in fact strategically systemized within our land-based existence is an interesting paradox that I enjoy exploring. This paper reviews a recent body of work that investigates mapping, gaming, and the military and how each of these abstract to control our experience of the land. Three artworks are discussed in detail: GolfWar a series of 18 paintings, WarGame an installation of paintings and Tactical Gaming a site-specific installation. The artifice that fashions the land and frames our perception is layered and multifaceted; I look at the relationship between war and game and promote further connections between larger entities such as nature and culture where struggles occur as we alter the land in which we live.

Keywords: Art, Mapping, Representations, The Real, Visual Organization, Images and Ideology, War, Game

> *"Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented scene and a presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what the frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package" (Mitchell, 2002, p5).*

AS AN ARTIST, the representation of the landscape through various existing systems interests me. It can alter reality keeping us at an abstracted distance by turning the human into passive spectators and consumers. It can change landscape into a capitalized form. The question of how the landscape is mediated by our culture led to the making of the three artworks I am going to discuss within this paper.

GolfWar

GolfWar, 2003, one of 18, Acrylic on Printed Fabric

Physically very simple this first artwork is a promotion of further thought rather than a statement. Looking at GolfWar, I hope that you are motivated to make connections between larger entities, such as nature and culture or war and game.

Eighteen rectangular canvases were stretched with a military camouflage fabric that have painted alterations that change the space of the military ground and make reference to the Golf Course, with its flag, green, fairway, and bunkers. The eighteen paintings refer to the eighteen holes of a typical golf course. By pairing a golf course with a military background, I prompt further thought from the viewer. What is the connection between the two? The camouflage

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and the generic golf course are similar -- they both are a simulacrum of an entity in our imaginations and a man-made construct that works from, but contradicts nature. The golf course becomes a standard form, conjured up from a mixture of non-places, a repeatable image, an echo of nature but denying nature's freedom. The camouflage canvas is a replication of an 'idea' of a landscape, with repetitive patterning that becomes a man-made artificial nature which is quite aptly designed to return to land to mask and camouflage the human into their surroundings.

Further similarities between golf and the military become apparent as one continues to make connections. My original thought was one of hierarchy and status, of rising up the ranks. We all know that golf is the business man's game and through this activity, mergers and alliances bring global corporations together or take them apart: contracts are drawn up or torn down. The golf course becomes a common ground not too dissimilar to the battlefield where the goal is the flag. The flag is a symbol of conquered terrain and nationhood, boundaries, frontiers and control of the land, of the game won and lost. A generic basis for these meetings then is probably wise, as say, Japan meets America on equal terms and familiar ground to strike a deal. East can meet west and pursue friendly competition and profitable contracts. Not surprising then, in this age of globalization that the game of golf is at its most popular.

The artifice of the course reminds us of how man likes to play god with his surroundings, whether it be the conquering of a new country, or a culture, or the conquering of nature -- the fashioning of land for the sport of golf or the sport of war. Looking at the Scottish courses which closely follow and respect nature and the more artificial American courses of say Las Vegas, we see the tight model of the course has slight variations that give subliminal messages of either the democratic ideals of a brand new land or a rich rugged rustic history which is built on its scenic beauty. The landscape is shaped to enable a "propagandist transmission of national identity and pride" (Malcolm, 2000).

The landscape itself becomes political by how we frame it and contrive it.

These 18 golf course canvases lead me down a speculative path where I begin to question the depth of authentic culture. Could sport or another such generic activity be enough to feed globalization leading us to a watered down simulacrum of culture? Could this diminish the feeling of the 'other' and perhaps even prevent wars?

Tactical Gaming

Tactical Gaming, 2004, Series of Photographs within an Installation

This next artwork entitled Tactical Gaming was an installation that was created in my homeland Scotland.

"The game of golf began on the sandy, seaside links land of Scotland. The first courses were routed through windswept native grasses over droughty soils and were subjected to incessant wind and storms as well as erosion from grazing and burrowing animals. All of these elements at work on the deep and unstable sands led to the creation of what we call bunkers -- places where grass does not grow or has been forcibly removed. These bunkers were often then left or enhanced as golf evolved into a game of rules, competitions around the world – even where sand did not exist naturally" (Golfer Magazine, 2001).

Leading on from the thoughts present in GolfWar, I began to reexamine the ideas concerning natural versus unnatural land manipulation. To what extent can we let the way we control and inhibit the land actually control and inhibit our natural existence?

Having asked a local golf course for a spare red golf flag, I pursued the making of a fictional golf course that would span the cities of Glasgow to

Dundee. This course would invade the countryside and the city with its local haunts to create a game, which if undertaken, would inhibit the running of daily life itself. Physically the installation consists of the first 17 holes represented through photographic images, the golf course map and the real golf flag, all installed in a downtown Glasgow art gallery. The map locates the eighteen flags and reveals the photographs of the first seventeen holes in ridiculous places. Hole 1 appears to be in the middle of the North Sea, hole 5 is at the dentist, hole 9 sits in between the crime and western sections at the local library. The 18th hole is the physical flag displayed within the depths of the gallery, where dramatic lighting and an ominous shadow from a hovering surveyor plane add a worrying military reference. Reference to war within the context of a game requires the viewer to make connections that inform each other on multiple levels to create a serious yet playful conversation with the viewer. We can see that a ludicrous game that sends golf balls flying into malls, churches and dentists in the name of healthy competition, has similarities to the more devastating game of war, where flying weapons destroy such places and end lives. Where we see labels such as freedom and democracy being used to fight wars about power and control we are reminded that war always related to the land and how we live there. The land becomes the playing field and as the games infringe onto the running of daily life, the players control the bystanders.

So, we pot the final hole under surveillance and in an art gallery, where additional higher powers maintain control and frame our perceptions. I like to imagine that one day the institutions will fall and mankind will end the artifice and inhibiting games to return to the wilderness, unframed and unmediated.

Tactical Gaming, 2004, Installation View

War/Game

War/Game, 2006, Installation View

The next art project, War/Game, continues to connect man-made abstractions or mediations of the land.

This artwork consists of numerous small hexagonal-shaped landscape paintings that are exhibited in a grid-like format. Accompanying the paintings is a legend that becomes the key to War/Game. The different painterly marks have been scanned and converted to a digitally-produced grid with appropriated explanations that use the language of mapping, military maneuvers and Wargame tactics.

For this artwork I first researched various methods of coding the landscape. I visited the map room at my library and collected books on Wargaming, cartography books, military maps, and found old Wargames to build up a visual database. I then brought these various map signage systems together using the language of painting.

Historically, landscape painting turns the view into the viewed. It becomes laden with the artist's or patron's subjective viewpoint, contorted to fit an ideal such as the pastoral, the sublime, or the beautiful. Marks on a canvas can represent or be signs for vast open spaces, clouds, lakes and urban dwellings. With a swift move of the brush an artist can evoke a landscape that a viewer can interpret and read. Like W.J.T Mitchell suggests in his essay 'Imperial Landscape,' the landscape is already a representation full of a vast network of cultural codes. Landscape is already artifice, full of "symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meaning" (Mitchell, 2002). Since landscape often involves issues of territory and ownership, it is likely then that these hidden meanings radiate political power and control. Like painting and the landscape itself, the map also has an agenda or a point of view. Mapping is not natural; it creates boundaries with which we bind the planet and ourselves. As Denis Wood says in his influential book 'The Power of Maps',

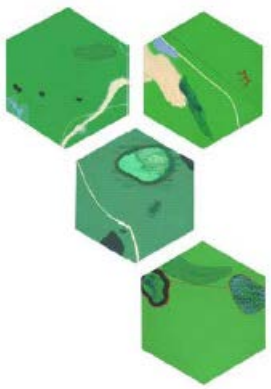
"There is nothing natural about a map. It is a cultural artifact, a culmination of choices made among choices, every one of which reveals a value: not the world, but a slice of a piece of the world; not nature but a slant on it; not innocent, but loaded with intentions and purposes" (Wood, 1999, p108).

It is the persuasive manner of cartography that gives the map its authoritarian control, to the extent that it can facilitate appropriation, conquest and colonization. As Irit Rogoff muses "..how powerful this language of cartography is in masking the difference and producing unity and homogeneity" (Rogoff, 2000, p75).

The code or map, the landscape and the artwork create an interesting matrix of the sign, the signified and the signifier, respectively. The denotation is at a distance from the connotation and it is only the conventions of the signifying system that will help the viewer decode the meaning of the sign. However, these conventions, being peculiar to a culture, various systems or the cultural baggage an individual carries, allow for confusion and redundancy.

Within War/Game artist's tools such as color, form, composition and texture are overlaid with various foreign military conventional signs and symbols, Wargame symbology and cartographic markings, to create a complex mismatched system of coding. The serious art of war has been reduced to a game that has no rules and makes no sense. What Irit Rogoff writes about another artist's work can also apply here.

"It is only after considerable scrutiny that the viewer realizes that these details in fact do not indicate any reflected realities of then supposedly mapped surface. Instead they formulate an illusionary visual language of cartographic credibility and proceed to deploy it for purposes of critical obfuscation rather than enlightened clarification… The slightest breach of the agreed-upon system of represented knowledge allows for everyone's flights of fancy to enter the argument" (Rogoff, 2000, P92).



War/Game, 2006, Detail, Acrylic on Canvas

Although the paintings are hexagonal, a shape typically used in War games, they are initially innocent in their construction with simple abstracted marks that are signs for an aerial landscape. But it is not

the act of painting that contains a question, it is the subsequent layering of different systems of symbology and the decoding of the marks in the accompanying digitized Legend that exposes the once innocent paintings with political undertones. What we see here is not just paint as a sign for landscape, but a landscape upon which there is struggle: control issues of nature versus culture are communicated in the Legend's decoding. One simple gestural mark in the painting now stands for troops advancing, and another for an anti-tank barricade. What originally seemed natural and innocent, creative mark-making and the landscape itself, is now tainted by mankind's need for control and ownership. What is it that makes us want to catalogue, bind and homogenize the unknown or untamed? Whether it is the categorizations within art, sport or war, we pin it down, apply rules and create myths. Do we want our civilizations to be built on the foundation of myth and artifice?

These three artworks explore only a small facet of how mankind inflicts systems upon the land. The artifice that fashions the land and frames our perception is layered and multifaceted. I only need to look around and I am faced with an endless supply of visuals that mediate and contrive, art aside, we have mass media, urban development, landscaping, tourism and transportation systems. I am excited about exploring this research further and producing new artworks that investigate how we humans can and do alter the land in which we live.

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Prof Dana Hargrove
Rollins College, United States of America

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