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Book Review: Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim, Editors: Is Landscape...?

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Is Landscape...?

Book review: Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim,
Editors, *Is Landscape...? Essays on the Identity of Landscape*

Karl Kullmann

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<http://www.jaeonline.org/articles/reviews-books/landscape-%E2%80%A6-essays-identity-landscape#/page1/>

Is Landscape...? is published under Routledge's prolific Landscape Series, which has expanded the volume of discursive publishing in the field. As a contribution to this discourse, *Is Landscape...?* presents both a documentation and projection of Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim's proseminar at the Harvard Graduate School of Design that explores questions of landscape identity. Following Garrett Eckbo's antecedent 1983 article "Is Landscape Architecture?", fourteen authors from landscape architecture and a range of associated fields discern whether landscape is alternately literature, painting, photography, gardening, ecology, landscape planning, urbanism, infrastructure, technology, history, theory, philosophy, life, or architecture.

Exploring questions of landscape identity is an important and enduring topic for the field. As a multivalent term in both etymology and application, *landscape* often exerts an unsettling presence within the discipline and profession of *landscape architecture*. These dislocations are illuminated in the distinction between *architectural* conceptions of landscape and *landscape architectural* conceptions of landscape. Perhaps unintentionally, this divergence is expressed in the bookending of *Is Landscape...?* with Moshen Mostafavi's foreword, and in closing, David Leatherbarrow's reconsideration of

Is Landscape...?

Essays on the Identity of Landscape

Edited by Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim

Eckbo's original question. Although both authors primarily define landscape in relation to architecture, landscape also routinely orchestrates both figure *and* ground, completely independent of architecture. While Mostafavi does appeal for an independent identity for the field, landscape—while not necessarily architectural—is by its very essence, always relational to something else.

In between these *architectural landscape* bookends, a host of other landscape relations emerge. As is to be expected of an edited volume of authors diverse in both discipline and prominence, responses to the given questions vary widely in scope and engagement. Authors who assiduously filter their arguments through the given question offset those who only briefly return to the question as a form of circular conclusion. In these instances, the rhetorical mechanism appears to restrict and reduce, rather than to open up definitions of landscape. Nonetheless, when read as a “thickened” whole, a useful overlapping patchwork of fragments on landscape does emerge through the book. Either explicitly stated by the authors or as an impression, each chapter concludes the following:

Is landscape *literature*? Potentially, since each can inform or adopt the other. Is landscape *painting*? Yes, since landscape and representation are inseparable. Is landscape *photography*? Yes, both are strongly interwoven. Is landscape *gardening*? No, but both are diminished by decoupling. Is landscape *ecology*? It is a complicated relationship. Is landscape *planning*? Yes, landscape is the medium and result of planning. Is landscape *urbanism*? According to the evidence, yes. Is landscape *infrastructure*? Yes, and politically so. Is landscape *technology*? They are entwined through making. Is landscape *history*? Landscape *has a* history and *is a* history. Is landscape *theory*? Yes, but this leads to more intriguing questions. Is landscape *philosophy*? Both are inextricably linked. Is landscape *life*? Landscapes are *for* life. Is landscape *architecture*? Both are *topographic* arts.

If, as the editors state, this process unpacks landscape's (unquestionably cumbersome) baggage, how then should it be repacked? Which disciplinary luggage should be retained,

reconfigured, supplemented or discarded? Here, the book proffers more questions than answers: it opens up the cone of inquiry rather than narrowing it down; it reconnoiters the territory rather than crystalizing a nascent movement. For this reason, *Is Landscape...?* is unlikely to achieve the impact of contemporary edited classics (with whom it shares some authors) such as *Ecological Design and Planning* (Wiley, 1997), *Recovering Landscape* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), and *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2006). Rather—as is embodied in the vivid safety yellow of the jacket—the book is best understood as a report on a work in development.

This is explicit in the sense that the editors aspire to ask further questions of landscape beyond the artificial constraint of seminar scheduling within an academic semester. It is also implicit if the core motivation of the book is taken to reside exactly midway through in Waldheim's chapter “Is Landscape Urbanism?” Given that this chapter draws from Waldheim's current book *Landscape as Urbanism: a General Theory* (Princeton University Press, 2016), we might best understand *Is landscape...?* as a reciprocal work. Whereas *Landscape as Urbanism* chronicles, codifies, reflects and refines a catalytic design movement, *Landscape is...?* dispatches explorations across the terrain and down into the crevices of a thickened field of landscape.

The implications here are twofold. First, after almost two decades of evolution of a movement that has been enormously productive for the spatial arts—and landscape architecture in particular—the potency of landscape urbanism may have plateaued. Second, if *landscape* is reduced to serving as a prefix to *urbanism*, many other productive landscape associations are overshadowed. That is, rather than construing it as a problematic term ripe for jettisoning, *landscape* retains potency for further innovation and adaptation of *landscape architecture*—in all its forms.

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