

Between the lines

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Susann Ahn, Isabelle Fehlmann, Lara Mehling

“How to read” literature has exploded in recent years. We want to read faster; we want to read more critically. Universities are instituting writing dedicated entirely to teaching reading and writing—in that order. Critical thinking is best exercised in the essay form, as the French word *essayer* still reminds us. It presents us with the opportunity to test an idea and make a claim. To simultaneously examine and argue is risky business, but this is also our task as designers. We observe and analyze, imagine, speculate, and finally we design. Yet while the humanities are readily training students to read texts critically, within the design disciplines we have few pieces to fall back on to teach us how to read landscapes critically—despite the fact that this act is arguably among the oldest of human activities—scanning landscapes for shelter, for food, for pleasure.

In the spring of 2016, the Chair of Professor Christophe Girot invited landscape architects, architects, and artists to discuss innovative site-reading methods in the context of an elective course entitled Delta Dialogues. Active in both research and practice, these women have developed hybrid approaches, which, as the term “site-reading” would suggest, bring together cartographic site-surveying methods with less conventional literary methods for engaging the terrain not only physically but also theoretically. By addressing neither component of the compound “site-reading” alone, our intention in this issue of *Pamphlet* is likewise to expand this sort of textual fieldwork using words, lexicons, dictionaries, card games, cartographic diaries, and other image-text modes of investigation.

We want to encourage readers to participate in this dialogue by actively reading between the lines—or, more specifically, to read transformations, flows, boundaries, layers, atmospheres, and stories between the lines. Each of these six reading topics speaks to diverse landscape processes and working methods, and, in its own way, traces overlapping and intertwining conceptual threads between the contributions. These terms have emerged to address, respectively, the acts of transforming, sensing, transgressing, digging, approaching, and telling landscapes—natural, built, and imagined.

Reading Transformations

Deltas are places of transformation, places of restless upheaval and silent exchange. Everything appears as if in motion; there is little if no stasis. To investigate these places, it does not suffice to set one's attention to any single or particular moment, whether before or after. To understand deltas, one must pay close attention to process and focus on the in-betweens, for it is within the transitions that we may find clues to this landscape. The five invited authors critically read these landscape transmutations from various perspectives. At times their lines of thought diverge, at others they interweave to tell a larger story. To follow them is to discover a set of approaches aimed at grasping transformations—that is, to learn to uncover, describe, analyze, use, and design them.

Ellen Braae turns to the legendary explorer Alexander von Humboldt in search of historical transformation processes that enable her to show how new methods for landscape architecture, and even a shift in perspective, emerge. Jane Wolff engages precise language for understanding and communicating these complex processes. Through a set of playful approaches, she draws attention not only to the transformation of landscape but also the transformation of language. Anuradha Mathur questions the validity of current representational techniques and, even more fundamentally, our very landscape imagination. In response, she proposes an alternative vision: a landscape of gradients shaped by constant flux. Through design and method, she scrutinizes this landscape in multiple timescales and dimensions. Catherine Mosbach encounters transformation in the realization of her firm's projects, in which the plan may often not indicate the end of the design process as much as mark its true beginning. In this case, transformation arises from an unwavering willingness to adapt, calibrate, and improve. Judith Albert “embodies” the process; she allows herself to be carried by the fluid force, to feel the way it touches and transforms her body, which soon dissolves to become a part of the quickening current.

Reading Flows

Water flows are fundamental to a delta system and its various material configurations. In flows, movement is amorphous and form ephemeral. Still, this unrelenting force represents continuity. Balancing these extremes, “flows” describe the shaping process itself—not only of delta landscapes, but of every wet terrain. They hold immense compositional potential, for flows flow in the present to shape the future. Reading and expressing flow fosters imagination and demands intuition—when understood as a moment of creativity or allowing ideas to evolve. By integrating intuition into the design process, each invited author demonstrates just how manifold its effects on art and landscape architecture can be.

Intuition plays an especially important role in Judith Albert’s work. Stream of consciousness is poetically bound to the meandering traces of her line drawings. This metaphor deliberately allows for interpretation on the part of the viewer; with the concept of flow, she encourages trusting one’s own intuitive associations—for, in any event, “Thoughts and water are impossible to retain.” Catherine Mosbach likewise adapts flow characteristics for a working approach to design. “Delta as concept” is her motto. She focuses on incorporating a degree of uncertainty—such as the unpredictable developments of a landscape project during or after its implementation—into her design process. And along these lines, Anuradha Mathur dissuades designers from considering the natural process of flowing, and especially overflowing, as an obstacle. Instead she urges us to reconsider them as opportunities. Similarly, Ellen Braae’s transecting method reframes uncertainty as serendipity. Traversing a site for the first time typically involves stumbling along unpredictable pathways and into a slew of misperceptions, thus calling for a more responsive and intuitive approach. Jane Wolff considers this further by telling us that “Most people love San Francisco Bay better than they understand it.” She is seeking an interactive way to frame people’s associative relationships to place, in the hopes that documentation of firsthand experiences may serve as a starting point for considering the Bay’s—and any other site’s—ongoing development.

Reading Boundaries

It would not be absurd to argue that the known world is drawn. In lines. The clearest way of understanding distance—the space extending from our own bodies to the horizon, which surrounds us in every direction—is measuring the difference between two coordinate points. Lines drawn north-south and east-west overlap to form a grid, a veritable warp and weft of our imagination. When do we follow lines in the landscape and when do we cross them? Encountering lines both parallel and perpendicular to our own movement, we have a choice: to read these lines as limits or as starting points. What appears as an obstacle may become both an enabler and a guide to those willing to enter “muddy waters.”

Anuradha Mathur describes the work of “blurring and thickening the line” in response to a rigid structure. For her, inviting ambiguity means reframing a grid of lines as a field of gradients. Instead of reading lines of separation, in this case between land and water, Mathur reads the ambiguity of a wet landscape as a catalyst for innovation. Jane Wolff elaborates on these negotiated boundaries at another scale: She addresses the impossibility of drawing a line between nature and culture and urges readers to instead view these landscapes of human and nonhuman making as ecological hybrids. Wolff invites complexity by detecting in language the multiplicity we may recognize in a river’s meander, which always seeks to redefine itself. Catherine Mosbach also reads a delta, which carves and recarves the landscape by redistributing its very elements, as an alternative mode of thinking. For her, it is less about eliminating borders than about emphasizing potential transitions, transmutations, and temporalities. In other words, seeing the limit and seeing it again as a porous threshold. In this, Mosbach asks readers to consider “delta[s], or the transgression of limits,” as a reflection of our own attitudes and lifestyles—that is, our capacity for flexibility and imagination. Judith Albert likewise captures this personal approach by tracing the lines of her own thought process in a series of sketches, allowing ideas to dissipate and emerge, evolve and diverge, into “myriad meanders.”

Reading Layers

Deltas emerge where rivers run into lake or sea. They are places of transition, of reciprocity; water and land give shape to one another. Due to the landscape's geology and topography, rivers decelerate, and as a consequence, they begin to deposit the material collected in transit. That which was carried downstream settles on that which came before. Finally, sedimentation occurs to build horizontal layers. These are then subject to still other forces and densities, forming a movement across vertical "layers." The reading of these layers is an essential part of approaching delta sites, of both comprehending and imagining their past, present, and future.

Each of the authors reflects on this process by presenting diverse ways of engaging these layers in professional practice. Catherine Mosbach recognizes in the delta's layering the conceptual basis for a design proposal: "The folding, the unfolding, and the refolding of the different layers laid bare by a landscape project set in motion." In her opinion, the active, "creative involvement" of existing layers also serves as the starting point for any landscape architectural manipulation of site. Ellen Braae considers the existing, which she terms the "as found," a witness to past forms and thus its active inclusion a critical source of inspiration and direction for subsequent site developments. Anuradha Mathur understands layers as a depository for collective memory and their representation as an indicator and potential guideline for shaping landscape imagination down the line. In this way, the exposure of existing layers is of central importance to her, as is the clarification and communication of their correlation. Judith Albert's playful interpretation of layers invites an open-ended reflection on sedimentation: The infiltration of water becomes a poetic metaphor for the thoughts that permeate the various layers of perception—from close observation to intuitive reaction.

Reading Atmospheres

Reading atmospheres may be the greatest challenge yet. If water is hard to grasp for its amorphous and dynamic fluidity, then atmosphere is surely bound to slip through our fingers. The contributors in this issue have all called for a deeper, multi-valent, and imaginative reading of site. But how does one read atmosphere? And how does one design atmosphere, something that is more than the sum of its constituent elements? If we expand our understanding of atmosphere from “the air of locality,” as Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the term, to something more accessible, we discover “a surrounding influence or environment” and “an overall aesthetic effect of a work of art.” One may begin, then, by investigating the aesthetic, sensory, and temporal dimensions of a space.

Ellen Braae reminds us that a site is never objective, it is “defined by the bodily experience of it and the emotions it evokes.” She goes on to acknowledge that atmosphere is “a phenomenon taking place between the perceiver and the perceived,” which is to say that aesthetic engagement is not only highly subjective but in an urban context, also collective. Our definition of atmosphere is expanding. Any old thesaurus will try to describe atmosphere through related terms: ambience, climate, mood, character, color, flavor. We perceive these pervasive, invisible terms through more than a single sense. Appropriately, Braae questions “how to capture and represent site qualities in terms of relational atmospherics.” The substantial contribution of atmospherics to a site demands new forms of perception to match the medium. Associative mediums may be visual, such as Anuradha Mathur’s photo-collages, but they can also be textual. Jane Wolff finds her medium, that intervening instrument through which sensory impressions are communicated or physical forces transmitted, in an illustrated lexicon. In this issue, Wolff’s story also claims that site “evidence” is not merely physical. She urges the landscape detective to “situate [...] physical evidence in the context of relationships, desires, and logistical possibilities” before constructing an explanatory narrative.

Reading Stories

In a wandering mind, far-flung ideas are often captured by their formulation in language. Words give thoughts contours, capture their substance, their meaning, for others to see. And while model, sketch, or brushstroke may serve as adequate modes of expression for architects, landscape architects, and artists, not only a differentiated design vocabulary but also a precise and nuanced use of literal language is needed for understanding delta landscapes.

In a creative manner, Jane Wolff not only demonstrates the way in which a place and its story can be read through language, but also how this linguistic and playful medium makes the reading attractive to a greater audience. She brings her own site investigations into dialogue with the views and observations of local inhabitants. This echoes Ellen Braae's approach, which emphasizes on-site conversations in the form of narratives as especially helpful in advancing and modifying one's own notes and analyses, setting them into proper context. It is worthwhile being curious about these stories. With greater understanding one can begin to question their telling, since word choice always tends to give clues to underlying social, political, and cultural value systems. In a tangible and precise way, Anuradha Mathur's work reveals how language, design, and representation influence one another mutually. In order to thoroughly study a site and its stories she thus begins by asking fundamental questions, such as "is Mumbai an island or an estuary?" This not only opens up a critical and unconventional approach to an otherwise conventional way of seeing and speaking, but also provokes new possibilities for design and representation. Judith Albert invites readers to dwell on the questions themselves, even those not yet fully formed. Indeed, with no answers immediately in sight, she still encourages readers to take their lines of questioning for a walk: "In the morning, an inward awakening to a question. In my head, thoughts branching out in all directions. They begin to flow, then stop suddenly."