
PLAT
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IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN MAY

JOSEPH SCHERER: In your *New Geographies* article "The Becoming-Energetic of Landscape," you refer to two different visualizations of the urban heat island effect: topography-like isotherms overlaid on a map, and a false-color infrared satellite image. Initially, I found myself thinking the false-color image is a more literal translation of the temperature data than the isotherm map. But then I started questioning that: is this just me looking at an image with a visual affinity to traditional photographs and thinking it's more "true"? Is the judgment of the way an image operates related to the reality of the translation process, or to the associations it has with other visual media?

JOHN MAY: There's a crucial distinction that I've made from the beginning of my work on these issues. One of the first things I had to do was conceptually distinguish the photograph from the image – which in truth constituted an historical appropriation of sorts; obviously the concept of the image predates telemetry and electronic imaging. But within my work I simply had to decide, as a kind of metaphysical conceit, that there's no such thing as a "digital photograph." There is photography, which is chemical and mechanical, and there is imaging, which is statistical and electrical. They aren't at all the same, and in fact they belong to radically distinct technical genealogies – so dissimilar, in fact, that one can plausibly argue that each contains within its structure wholly distinct epistemological assumptions which lead to quite dissimilar, and at times even contradictory, conceptions of the world. So in the particular instance you're referring to, I would be just a bit more precise and say that the comparison is between cartographic depiction and false-color imaging.

To your question: to my mind, one reason imaging stands in as such a convincing depiction of the world – that is, the source of its rhetorical power – is the fact that we continue to associate it principally with the photograph because that's our immediate corollary to the image. But – historically, technically, etcetera – the two actually have very little in common. So if the image is not genealogically related to the photograph, then what is the image related to? Well, if you look closely at the historical record, it's genealogically related to the emergence of datasets, and to the statistical reasoning embedded in those sets. An image is never anything more than an instantiation of a particular data set, and most architects know from experience that a virtually limitless number of images can be produced from a single body of data. In other words, there are far more of what Wittgenstein called "family ties" between an image and its dataset than between a photograph and an image of exactly the same scene. Until we begin to acknowledge that difference – conceptually, discursively, and even perceptually – we won't comprehend that the image can never possibly be neutral or undesigned.

SCHERER: But does that suggest that the photograph could be "undesigned"? I mean, obviously it's not…

MAY: No, no. The photograph isn't neutral or "undersigned" either. But with the emergence of imaging we find a radical shift in both the speed of manipulability and the epistemological assumptions latent within its structure. We all know this from Photoshop – where one is actually no longer dealing with "photos" anymore; it should be called

"Imageshop" – which allows for extremely rapid visual transformations. But it's not just the speed of manipulability that qualifies the image as a techno-epistemic rupture; it's the fact that the entire process of visualization has been placed beneath, or anterior to, ocular perception.

Take for example the art of "photo doctoring," which has existed as long as photography itself. It was actually a legitimate profession throughout much of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries: photos were taken, and an artist was hired to "artistically" retouch them. But that process was radically different than the world in which we've all grown up. And this is where imaging cuts across all of contemporary culture. You can take any cultural phenomenon and consider its relation to imaging. What is anorexia, and how is it related to imaging? What is ADHD and how is that related to imaging? The image was specifically designed during the Second World War to be rapidly transmitted; that was its explicit advantage over the photograph. But that mode of transmission has also given birth to the rapid, sub-ocular transformation of the entire visual domain.

So there's nothing nostalgic about these observations. Life was not somehow generally "better" during the photochemical age. The Nazis were actually some of the most skilled photo manipulators. They would drastically increase the size of their armies in their propoganda photographs as a way of stoking jingoistic sentiments within the general population. There's nothing neutral about that. But the conditions of perception are radically different now, and in ways that we tend to gloss over because these successive visual regimes appear so similar.

EILEEN WITTE: Do you think that the common use of smart phones and other personal devices to scan an image and link to a dataset will bring about a wider understanding of the latent functions of the image and its inherent difference from the photograph?

MAY: Perhaps. I was talking recently with a statistician at UCLA about this, and he was quite optimistic about what he calls "statistical literacy." I agree that it can happen, but at present I'm not terribly optimistic that it's going to happen within the general population.

But that's one role that theory can take on: to make explicit the implications of our present illiteracy. Perhaps the chasm can be closed a bit. When you research these technical systems, the only things written on them are these utterly lobotomized trade magazine histories, which are always written in monograph-style banality: "And then this happened, and then in 1942 so-and-so invented such-and-such a tool." Within the engineering trades, this instrumentation is described as essentially neutral, as a kind of feature of progressive modernity, as though the techniques we've developed throughout modernity have no relationship to the conditions we now face, as though tools do not also break the worlds they make, as though subjects cede no agency when they become users, etcetera.

image by: Alex Yuen

IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN MAY

JOHN MAY: It seems that as a discipline, we have two choices at present: to continue down a path in which technique and discourse are driven further and further from one another, or to struggle towards an imperfect realignment of the two. The first is, in my view, utterly reactive. It simply receives its marching orders from the outside, from external technological prerogatives that it never bothers to understand, and the details of various forms of automation come to replace what was formerly known as "architectural theory." Theory – or rather "thought" in general – is reduced to the banality of a user's manual. And this is of course occurring with increasing frequency. We are now seeing the appearance of utterly vacuous "parametricist manifestos" on the application of scripting to urbanism (as though it weren't already happening through various geographic instruments). But this approach to disciplinarity has only become possible in the absence of other viable theories, and ultimately in the absence of a conceptual vocabulary capable of capturing the reality of technological life – a vocabulary that exceeds rather than derives from its associated conditions.

But there is a second option. Rather than engaging in this sort of passive, antihistorical speculation, we could work from the bottom up, by examining and describing very carefully the features of the technological milieu in which we are swimming. Doing so will require that we first admit the theoretical poverty of our technical repertoire, but it might allow us to reconstitute the discourse of architectural theory around an entirely new set of concepts – some of which will almost certainly need to be invented, others which can simply be reanimated and updated.

This is beginning to happen quietly, among a small group of younger historians and theorists, for whom the politics of '68 were never anything but a kind of vague mythos. In its place, we are beginning to work through what it means to "manage" something, to "monitor" a set of conditions, to "regulate" a space, or what it means to be a "user" – these are questions that Zeynep Alexander and I are now working on. It's a novel subject type, and we know almost nothing about it. So in other words we are beginning to work through what it means to utter certain phrases that have long appeared far too banal for consideration, but which we are now realizing are determinant of our daily reality. There is an entire catalog of technical concepts that, with a great deal of historical-theoretical work, could become an entirely new field of intelligibility for the design disciplines.

What concerns me today is that it seems inevitable that architecture, landscape architecture, and urbanism will collapse onto one another and become some kind of hybrid field. We're already seeing that coalescing at an institutional level. Architecture and urbanism, in order to remain culturally relevant – so the logic goes – will have to adhere to certain kinds of bureaucratic demands, and make appeals to certain kinds of larger institutional prerogatives. Those demands are inevitably going to be "environmental."

And to the extent that that concept has been colonized by a particular socio-technical conception of the world, it's inevitable that architecture, or at least certain factions within architecture, will posit itself as a form of environmental management. The problem is we've never known exactly what that means. In my view, it's a form of neoliberal bureaucratic dramaturgy, centered on hollow technological spectacles, in which the population is the main protagonist. So where does that leave us? It will be a decision that educational institutions make on a case-by-case basis. But it appears already as though many will move towards reconceiving the design field as a form of environmental or ecological management.

SARAH HIEB: I don't see architecture being able to change those conditions. Are you talking about the market economy?

MAY: That's the elephant in the room. And that's why there is a generational schism. I think architectural theory has, with some exceptions, failed in recent years. One of the ways it has failed is by refusing to acknowledge that we live within an economic framework that structurally mocks the concept of limitation. Something happened in the 1990s: when was the last time you read anything in architectural theory that actually used the word "capitalism?" The erasure of that term from our vocabulary is symptomatic of larger contemporary social pathologies. I teach, and it's depressing to see that nowhere is the neoliberal dream of privatization more perfectly realized than in the contemporary American university, in ways that students don't even realize. The phrase "public education" is by now essentially nonsensical. That's depressing. There has to be some kind of shift from the bottom up, because the people who are now running the institutions have simply come to accept that "this is how the world is." How else could something like "green consumerism" find intellectual purchase? Green consumerism is an absurd dream that fictitiously marries Enlightenment liberty with an endless river of shiny new objects. It's the kind of dream that only an "adult" would find appealing or even plausible. Obviously I'm not suggesting that we return to outdated modes of political critique – Marxism or some variant – but that we should at least be trying to describe and understand the ways in which design is today thoroughly imbricated in the expanding spatial politics of neoliberalism.

EILEEN WITTE: In your writing, you associate the rise of a statistical regime with the idea of landscape as "energetic." Do you think that this new understanding of an energetic landscape is influencing what we design? If so, are we just appropriating this framework in a metaphorical manner – for example, with surface manipulation projects?

MAY: It was principally during the Second World War that the "becoming-electronic" of our environment took place; when the concepts of environment and landscape were technically merged with the old idea

image by: Jessy Yang

of the "theater of war." You can see this very clearly in early climatological literature – especially urban climatological literature, but also in field crop analysis and things like that. You can see a very rapid shift in how people talk about the landscape, how people talk about environments, how problems are posed. Prior to World War II, they were not posed in terms of territorial efficiency; "productivity," perhaps, but not "regional energy balances" and "urban emmisivity metrics."

Against that historical background you can pose certain questions: Is it entirely by coincidence that architecture became fascinated with the "performative" metrics of building skins precisely in conjunction with the capability to measure and quantify that kind of performance across an urban scale? And, perhaps more importantly, what it is in us that always wants to return to questions of efficiency? What is it in the modern psyche that always wants to posit the problem of efficiency as the irreducible denominator in our environmental equations?

It's an important question today because when you look carefully at the history of modernization, you can make a convincing argument that that pursuit of efficiency is precisely what has led to the absurdly wasteful lives we live. Certainly the most efficient corporations in the world are also the most wasteful – Wal-Mart, for example – because they are predicated on strategies of internal management that generate tremendous external effects. I am far less concerned with how design can engage with more energy-efficient ways of working than with the underlying question: Why are we so convinced that's the only question we should be asking ourselves? Why does it trump, or deflect, all other considerations? Why such faith? Part of what my work tries to show is that our fixation with these partially-bankrupt concepts is a function of how we've come to see the world – to "truthfully" visualize the world, and re-present it to ourselves – as a statistically defined energetic field. Far from being a simple process of scientific discovery, the emergence of that perceptual field seems to belong instead to a significant phase change within modernity – when the "age of ideas" gave way to an age of energies. In my view, this phase change also entailed the surrendering of "enlightenment" to "environment," and from that point forward it seems as though modernity has been much more a process of management than one of discovery.

Again, there's no doubting the efficacy of that way of thinking, but that efficacy can no longer justify itself as an unquestioned virtue in our practices. We need

to have a historical-theoretical project, with a longer timescale of consideration, which runs parallel to this discourse on performativity that's taking over the design fields. Performativity has come to dominate the architectural discourse on sustainability, and the question of performance is a surrogate for efficiency. Why don't we have a parallel theoretical project asking: "Why is it that we always frame our situation that way?"

HIEB: In your article about Fresh Kills, you suggest that it projects a shiny image of a green project, but that it doesn't change our understanding of ecology. And, more problematically, such an image allows us to ignore the reality: that our present understanding of ecology is unsustainable. To what degree is architectural representation – not just the project when it's built, but promotional images, for example, implicated in this cover up?

MAY: I would separate it into two types of imaging, two types of visualization in architecture. There is blatant, outright propaganda in architecture, and we all ought to be ruthlessly critical of that; it's one of the most coercive forms of "greenwashing," and we're participating in it too often. Oftentimes, we are the ones hired to imbue territorial interventions with a kind of environmental eroticism; to bring desire to bear on utterly unsubstantiated methods. So there's that type of visualization, and we can say: "images are used to lie to people." Well, that's true, and it has always been the case and it always will be the case, and we don't need any complicated theories to critique it.

The more difficult cases surround the well-intentioned interventions belonging to a very sincere emerging discourse on ecological design, which has yet to recognize the difficulty of making appeals to certain kinds of scientific discourses. And that's where more of my work has been situated. I've never insinuated that the Field Operations proposal was intentionally misleading people, but rather that they unwittingly lied to themselves by appealing to the language of modern scientific environmentalism. This is a crucial question for architecture going forward because there's a strong and emerging camp that wants, very sincerely, to posit architecture, landscape, and urbanism as explicit forms of "environmental management." Problems arise with this view when we admit that design is always-already a kind of environmental management, and that identifying one's work with modern environmentalism – particularly under the banner of scientific truth – no longer extricates our projects from the risks they are designed to mitigate.