The urgency of recovering contemplation. New Media Art and the transformation of nature into landscape

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Abstract Adam Basanta is the author of the installation named Landscape Past Future, exhibited at the gnration gallery in Braga, Portugal, between 23 October and 11 January 2020. This artistic project is based on images of works of art (landscape painting and photography) from the main institutional collections, publicly available, used to create new digital landscapes. Applying custom digital mosaic software, small data sets were placed and rearranged on a virtual screen to create a new aggregate image. Starting from this case, we intend to investigate how the landscape genre, remedied by the new media art, challenges us to reframe both nature and landscape ideas, in contemporary times. This article aims to discuss the role of new technologies as a medium that can help us to recover the exercise of contemplation, and to transform « nature » into « landscape », as an action of seeing and thinking, after all the first step to really act, with a sense of urgency, on our unsustainable habitat.

Keywords Landscape | Nature | New Media Art | Contemplation | Visual Arts

Where we actually see landscape and not just a sum of isolated natural objects, we have a work of art in *statu nascendi*

Georg Simmel (1913-2011: 47).

Adam Basanta is the author of the installation named *Landscape Past Future*, exhibited at the *gnration* gallery in Braga, Portugal, between 23 October and 11 January 2020. In the exhibition's room sheet we can read: «At a time when the natural world is collapsing under the weight of human attempts to conquer it, landscape painting and its romantic association with bucolic nature are reconstituted in a digital universe of preservation: a virtual *simulacrum* that contrasts with our testimony of the disappearance of the natural world». This artistic project is based on images of works of art from the main institutional collections, publicly available, used to create new digital landscapes. Applying custom digital mosaic software, small data sets are placed and rearranged on a virtual screen to create a new aggregate image.

Starting from this case, it is proposed with this essay to discuss how the landscape genre, remedied by the new media art (Manovich, 2002; Rush, 2005; Candy, Edmonds & Poltronieri, 2018), challenges us to reframe the idea of nature, or landscape as aesthetics of nature, in contemporary times. As Jakob (2012) says, "enjoying a landscape means capturing the world through a cultural filter and a mental palimpsest: concrete representation is always the representation of the representation of the representation…". Precisely, it is important to ask how in the new Basanta's aggregated images mental references and retained cognitive and cultural principles persist, at the same time as new strategies for the construction of the gaze are reinvented. Taking Simmel's inspiration (1913-2011) as a starting point, we advance with the hypothesis that the landscape expresses the feeling - *Stimmung* - of nature, the possibility of its aesthetic appreciation that constitutes a trajectory relationship (Berque, 1997; 2011), between subject and object, or, in Heideggerian terms, of being-in-the-world.

In an increasingly intoxicated world of data, and particularly of images, from which generalized indifference arises, it is urgent to find new ways of awakening to feel that same sensitive world. As Sontag's (2004) states, in her well known essay called *Against Interpetation*, "We have to learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more". Awakening the senses to the aesthetic appreciation of «nature» (Serrão, 2013) can be enhanced by art, thus stimulating reflexive thinking and even a predisposition to the desire for action. Believing in the double *artialization* (Roger, 2011), of nature and culture, this article is therefore ready to discuss the role of new technologies as a *medium* that can help us to recover the exercise of contemplation, as an action of seeing and thinking,

after all the first step to really act, with a sense of urgency, on our unsustainable habitat.

1. Landscape as aesthetics of nature

In his well-known essay "Philosophy of Landscape", Georg Simmel (1913-2011) identifies the fundamental problem of the separation of the modern subject - being endowed with autonomy - from nature. The author speaks of a double split: the perception of nature divided into parts, on the one hand, contradicting the idea of nature as an undivided spatial totality and continuous temporal flow, and the subtraction of the self from nature, on the other.

According to the author, this double split results from the tragedy of modern culture, as well as the historical emergence of the landscape. As Serrão (2011: 39) states, in the introduction to Simmel's essay in its Portuguese version, the importance of the landscape results from the absolute need for "an animistic compensation for which one seeks to reestablish in a divided world the link to lost nature". How exactly is the landscape defined? In the Simmelian perspective, the landscape is a category of thought that is produced in the creative action of the gaze. Contrary to what happens in the different dimensions of our life, in which as observers we perceive ourselves as fragmented, the contemplative act allows us to experience ourselves as "the only subject of intuition and feeling" (Serrão, 2011: 40) . Such feeling is called by Simmel (1913-2011) as *Stimmung*, "a state of the soul", "the essential moment, which brings the separated parts back to the landscape as a felt unity", or even "the visible unity of the landscape". For the author, even the universal abstract concepts (serene or severe, heroic or monotonous, agitated or melancholic landscape) necessarily imply and intersect with the observer's feeling "exclusively connected to *this* landscape" [emphasis added][1].

Contemplating and feeling nature, thus transforming it into a landscape, is equivalent to being capable of an "artistic" look that converts life into form. The creative action of the look to which the author refers operates through a double procedure: analysis and synthesis: "This is precisely what the artist does - starting from the chaotic flow and the infinity of the immediately given world, delimiting a portion, capturing it and shaping it as a unit that now finds its meaning in itself, and cuts the threads that connect it to the world to reconnect them to their own center… " (Simmel, 1913-2011: 45). As if it were an exercise in cinematographic montage, the observer's gaze cuts out a fragment extracted from the vital flow of nature to find in that same fragment a given internal unit, and not the simple juxtaposition of its constituent and separate elements, in other words, creating the sense of landscape: "instead of a

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[1] Simmel (1913-2011: 50) uses the expression "…the *Stimmung* of this precise landscape".

meadow and a house and a stream and a procession of clouds we look at 'a landscape'" (Simmel, 1913-2011: 45)[2].

The author defines, therefore, the landscape as a "unifying concept", resulting from a double exercise of the gaze, of selection and recomposition, "which constitutes an individual, closed, full of itself and nevertheless remains linked without contradiction to the whole of nature and to its unity" (Simmel, 1913-2011: 44). In Simmel, the feeling of "nature" (*Stimmung*)[3] is characteristic of the artistic approach and, in this sense, the landscape is a work of pictorial art: "Where we actually see landscape and not just a sum of isolated natural objects, we have a work of art in *statu nascendi*" (Simmel, 1913-2011: 47).

The act of *seeing* and *feeling* the natural landscape, transforming it into an artistic one, is, in this perspective, an act of creation that takes us to other aesthetic approaches. Namely, in approximation to Simmel's point of view, Anne Cauquelin (1989-2000) defines landscape as a "vision of the nature of the things shown in its connection". In both cases, it is important to refute the common belief in the naturalness of the landscape. The landscape is, in the words of Cauquelin (1989-2000), an "invention".

Associated with the idea of harmony, experienced in the relationship between the individual and the natural environment, the landscape is subject to the criteria of appreciation and aesthetic judgment. This is how the "beautiful landscape" is defined (Cauquelin, 1989-2000: 3). The idea of landscape is therefore, according to Cauquelin (1989-2000: 4), "a construction that gives a shape, a framework, measures to our perceptions - distance, orientation, points of view, situation, scale". Starting from the idea of a garden, recreated from her own childhood memory, an impressionistic vision associated with her mother's dream, the author is interested in landscape-nature as a "shelter of purity, and refuge" (1989-2000: 5). Contrary to an essentialist and naturalistic view of the landscape, Cauquelin defends a constructivist approach: "It seems that the preposition according to which the notion of landscape and its perceived reality is an invention, a deposited cultural object, having its own function, which is that of permanently reassuring the frames of the perception of time and space, is today strongly requested and presides over all attempts to "rethink" the planet as an eco-social system "(Cauquelin, 1989-2000: 5).

In the West, the first "landscapes" appeared in the Renaissance, expressing a certain way of feeling and seeing, or, to put it another way, "a set of values ordered in a

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[2] A double split is at the base of the feeling of nature, described in 'Philosophy of Landscape' by Georg Simmel: "Spun off from the totality and amputated from one of its identity spheres, modern man - who divided Nature into isolated, loose and independent, that in the analytical spirit of science and the division of labor gain autonomy from spatial things - it can only partially recover it through a perceptual act that consolidates loose elements, stray pieces, in a new synthesis unit: the landscape" (Serrão, 2011: 34).
[3] Referring to Simmel's notion of "aesthetic intuition", says Serrão (2011: 35): "The visibility of a landscape and the affective radiation that emanates from it are the faces of the same special feeling, *Stimmung*, a combination of two individualities in an almost intersubjective agreement, felt in harmony, in the consonance that passes from us to it and at the same time from it to us".

vision…" (Cauquelin, 1989-2000: 8). In the landscape idea, a norm is projected, the mark of a certain culture. So it happens, in the pictorial universe, with the landscapes of Lorrain, Poussin or Cézanne.

What the landscape - as a *medium* (Berque, 1997; 2011), a reality that is both objective and subjective - allows us to observe is the evidence of nature, the presence of the surrounding world, not so much as experienced, but rather as imagined. The landscape is a fiction that aims to reinforce our belief in a kind of "pre-established agreement" with nature, an implicit protocol of expression of the desire for a harmonious relationship with the outside universe, impregnated with a spirit in a certain religious way, by while based on the illusory idea that "nature" will precede our conscience and culture. Despite the great variation of shapes and the thousands of folds that add together, forming a sub-system, within a given social and cultural structure, the idea of landscape is easily confused with the idea of nature (or the desire for nature), as designed in our collective imaginary and built through different perceptual devices.

Looking for the genesis of the notion of landscape, associated with painting, understood as a set structured through certain rules of composition, as a symbolic scheme of our close contact with nature, Cauquelin (1989-2000: 27) reproduces the thesis of some authors according to which the word and the notion appeared around 1415, being born first in Holland and having moved to Italy, supported by the elaboration of the laws of perspective[4]. In fact, the landscape would only assert itself once it was freed from its purely decorative role, moving from the background to the front of the scene. As the author states, "with the perspective, the question of painting and that of the landscape was born" (1989-2000: 68). The author even defends the joint birth of landscape and painting (1989-2000: 79).

According to Cauquelin (1989-2000: 35), what we call "landscape" has no correspondence in ancient Greek civilization, and a similar word or object is unknown. For the Greeks, the world of "Nature", the implicit evidence of vision, is the world of *logos*, the world of reason and language that runs through everything. Augustin Berque (2011), on the other hand, situates the birth of the notion of "landscape" in the 4th century, in China, preceding in many centuries its appearance in the West.

Although accumulating a long tradition, the notion of "landscape" has not yet stabilized. Andy Warhol, with his work *Do-it-Yourself (Landscape)* (1962), ironically challenges the observer to "complete" the "landscape", semi-drawn in his painting, advancing with the pre-determination of the composition scheme, in the form of "points to connect" and spaces, left free, to paint or fill. Having been born alongside the invention of leisure, in the context of high social classes, and in its distance from the city, associated with industry and work, the landscape is closely linked to the

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[4] It should be considered the definition of perspective according to Panofsky (1999) and the expression "symbolic form", according to which "form" as *a priori* of all visual and "symbolic" content because it brings together the cultural conquests of the Renaissance. Today, this expression has become a mark of modernity.

experience of aesthetic appreciation of "nature". In Berque's perspective (2011), based on the genesis of the notion of "landscape" in China, the artists, poets and literate individuals, freed from manual labor, were the ones who enjoyed the privilege of fruition and the expression of the "beautiful natural". However, the specificity of Chinese culture and imagery should not be overlooked, since the representation of the "landscape" in painting is often a more symbolic than mimetic product, more resonant with the collective imaginary than with the subjective perception of the sensitive landscape observed by the artist.

Even if, over time, the forms of composition of the pictorial landscape have undergone transformations, in its substance we can say that, from the point of view of Cauquelin (1989-2000), the "landscape" participates in the principle of eternity that is associated with nature, an infinite reality that precedes, in our imaginary, our own existence. Thus, one can speak, according to the author, of the same double concept: landscape-nature. Although built on a clipping procedure, once deriving from the perception and recreation of the gaze, in a Simmelian way, paradoxically, the landscape contains in itself the desire for infinity, we can say, a condition that constitutes the very notion of landscape (common to the idea of nature)). It is important to remember that the landscape is more than a form of mediation (*médiance*, according to Berque, 2011), a condition of the individual's connection with nature (of which, ultimately, we are part). Born as a sign of a given mental scheme that allows us to think about our relationship with "nature", which in turn is a complex idea, the "landscape" is a perspective, a coherent and organized point of view about the world we see. According to Cauquelin (1989-2000), between what we see and what we know, a protocol, a framework, a form is interposed, which allows not only to see things, but the connections between them or, better, "nature of the things shown in its connection" (1989-2000: 74). The landscape is, therefore, a *passage*, linking a vision to a reason (and vice versa), in agreement or disagreement with each other. Seeing as a whole, seeing from a distance, this is the capacity that the landscape exercises in us.

In the context of an increasingly technological culture and a discontinuous and pixelated experience, on the one hand, as well as deterritorialized, on the other, once immersed in a permanent and frantic mobility, that is, in a shattered experience of space-time that absorbs us in a totalitarian way, preventing the distension of the body and the gaze on the "natural" or sensitive world, the landscape is, today, what we miss. We lack the capacity, through the landscape, to build the distance of the gaze, determining a point of view, based on the creation of a sense of the whole, the invention of a connection between the disparate elements that make up the world to be seen and to feel. Therefore, not losing the power of a *landscape thought* is an urgency. Moreover because the absolute specialization and technicization that come with modernity, to which is added the perception, today, of an altered natural world, irremediably polluted and unsustainable, constitute a serious threat to our condition of empathy with the surrounding universe. Being able to see the relationships, between what we imagine, what we know and what we see, consists in assuming the urgency of

our role as creators of the sense of connection between the world of ideas and the world of the senses.

2. Landscape Past Future

Adam Basanta[5]'s *Landscape Past Future[6]* is the object of analysis chosen for this paper. It suggests both an overall view, a panoramic view in approximation to classic bucolic landscapes, and a fragmented view, translated into a checkered image, in mosaic, in the modern style with a slight cubist inspiration. In the perspective of Anne Cauquelin (1989-2000), the "space" of the landscape allows, precisely, on the one hand, to reconnect the fragments of landscapes extracted from original units, on the other, it gives a sense of unity to different landscapes, separated or united among themselves by their aesthetic and social codes, associated with certain sub-genres and expressive cultures from different eras. The author also says that "the technological turning point - far from destroying the 'landscape value'- on the contrary, it helps to show its status: technology highlights the artificiality of its constitution as a landscape" (Cauquelin, 1989-2000: 8).

Produced and presented in the form of aggregated images, Adam Basanta's landscapes show, in addition to the character of composition that constitutes the very notion of landscape, its construction on the countless landscapes already created, the many visions that other artists have given shape, expressing, both unique points of view and shared cultural codes. Based on a search made in archives of museums of different geographies, Basanta added reproductions of Dutch landscapes of the 17th and 18th centuries, Canadian chosen works (included in the Sotheby collection), but also multiple photographic landscapes of the 19th century, belonging to the Metropolitan Museum in New York. How can we escape the infinite process of recreation, the permanent accumulation of layers, of images upon images, which enclose the landscape in a true palimpsest? How to break the corset of the frame that, both in its form of perception *in situ*, and in its way of representation, *in visu*, using the words of Alain Roger (2011), artializes our view of the "natural" world? How can we "see again", that is, with the sense of urgency that Sontag (2004) tells us about? Cauquelin (1989-2000: 17) alerts us to the eternal associative and semiosic process of creating landscape:

> This nature was composed before us in a series of paintings, artificial images, placed before the confusion of things, organizing diverse and changeable materials according to an implicit law, and then we thought of bathing in the truth of the world as it was presented for

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[5] "Adam Basanta (b. 1985) is an artist, composer, and performer of experimental music. Born in Tel-Aviv (ISR) and raised in Vancouver (CAN), he lives and works in Montreal (CAN) since 2010". See more: http://adambasanta.com/bio

[6] https://adambasanta.com/landscapepastfuture

us, we only reproduce strong mental patterns, from distant evidence and thousands of previous projections. This constant reduction to the limits of a frame, assembled there by generations of eyes, weighed on our thoughts, directing them imperatively (Cauquelin, 1989-2000: 17).

In Basanta's images, the absence of evidence of the construction of a vanishing point or of the perspective illusion introduces some tension in the visual composition, appreciated in its affiliation with the genre "landscape". At the same time, it seems that the gradation between the foreground and the gradation of successively deeper planes does not seem to exist. In one of the images, for example, it can be read in the caption: *Dutch Landscape with Tree in Foreground* (2019). In the case of *Dutch Landscape (Cross-hatch)* (2019), or *Dutch Beach, Windswept* (2019), the light-dark contrast and different textures create the effect of a certain depth of field. In *Important Canadian Landscapes: Lakes and Sky* (2019), *Important Canadian Landscapes: Winter Scene* (2019) or *Important Canadian Landscapes: Field and Sky* (2019), the deconstruction of a central point of view, in turn, is more noticeable, allowing to equate the centrality of the observer's role. The evocation of infinity, as well as the new structures of perception introduced by the perspective, which are affirmed by tradition in the symbolic forms of the genre "landscape", do not have, in the cases in question, a clear expression. If nature is a reality that is beyond the limits of the painting, on the one hand, one might ask, on the other, if its representation in the form of landscape will not allow us its only way of accessing that same reality (constructed), in the form of a mental scheme capable of giving it meaning[7]. Besides, regardless of its pictorial representation, the "landscape" is a mental construction that shapes our view of the world[8]. As Cauquelin says, "we cannot see", it seems, but what has already *been seen*, that is, narrated, drawn, painted, relieved" (1989-2000: 82). The call for attention to the mediation and production devices of the look, that Basanta's work underlines, can be understood as a subtle manifesto that aims to alert to the urgency (and difficulty) of recreating a new way of seeing (and reflecting) about the surrounding world.

In the words of Cauquelin (1989-2000: 85), "it is painting that 'connects' the elements of nature". Constituting the landscape as a faculty of connection, precisely, showing things in their nature of interconnection, we can interrogate Basanta's work *Landscape Past Future* recognizing a double ambiguity. On the one hand, the landscapes shown, resulting from a final exercise in computer synthesis, and consisting of

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[7] Note the consolidation of typologies in the nineteenth century: country, pastoral and marine, sub-genres "defined from paintings displayed in interiors of houses increasingly distant from the countryside and which compensated for the mental indifference of the bourgeois spirit by the directly perceived nature" (Serrão, 2013: 134).

[8] In fact, it can be considered the ideographic nature of the landscape, namely the Dutch landscapes, which constitute a significant reference base in *Landscape Past Future*. Fromentin (1876) considers that Dutch "realism" is not a mechanical transcription of the effects of nature, but rather of painting and its bets are mainly formal.

aggregated images, have their origin in the operation of cutting and separating (the original landscapes-images are separated from their display contexts and transformed into parts of a new composition). On the other hand, the original landscapes are recombined with other landscapes and interconnected, forming a new composition as a whole, a kind of inter-landscape, resulting both from the articulation of many landscapes and from the synthesis of this multiplicity in a single unit, perceived as such. As Sales (2006: 297) argues: "The history of the landscape is a retrospective work, but one of composition and recomposition, that is, a work of reading".

The implicit criteria for appreciating nature tell us that, by definition, nature is always beautiful: "From the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, new codes of beauty emerge: the "picturesque" and the "sublime" (Sales, 2006: 304). The idea of nature is intrinsically associated with the idea of the manifestation of harmony between its constituent elements. To remember this symbolic place that nature itself is composed of is to bear in mind an archetypal desire that crossed civilizations and cultures, resisting until today. Although today it is important to talk about the decadence of the idea of "beautiful"[9], it persists in the collective and unconscious memory, which is fundamental to the orientation of our praxis.

What do we talk about, today, when we talk about nature? What do contemporary landscapes show? We are very far from the reality that in the landscapes of Arles, of Van Gogh, one can enjoy. In the Western world (and beyond), we turned our backs on nature a long time ago. The "natural" world photographed by Sebastião Salgado[10], in turn, surprises our gaze. We find strange the photographer's proximity and intimacy with his model. The last remnants of the 'uninhabited' territory express our own decay. Subverting the title of Berger (2009), we could say *Why do animals look at us?* Everywhere, the "natural" world shows us signs of a profound and irreversible imbalance. What is the feeling that the "landscape" today stimulates? How to connect the shards of the visible world? What invisibilities are revealed in the sense of "landscape"? Today, perhaps more than ever, there is an urgent need to *feel* and *see* again, to break away from the postal gaze. From this point of view, the work of some photographers, among which, in Portugal, André Cepeda[11] and Augusto Alves da Silva[12], have made interesting contributions. The same can be said of the collections of images, which record a hybrid and fragmented territory, by Álvaro Domingues (2009; 2017). The imperative of the type "Look at that beautiful landscape, see how the harmony of nature manifests itself!", implicit in the very notion of "landscape", only applies to the last places in the territory that still elude the desire for a certain aesthetic, intrinsic and coherent unit.
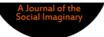
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[9] Note the next passage: "the marginalization of the beautiful natural that has been gradually being processed since the end of the 18th century" (Serrão, 2013: 135).

[10] https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/print-sales/explore-artists/sebastiao-salgado

[11] http://www.andrecepeda.com/projects/ontem_work/

[12] https://col-antoniocachola.com/?cat=544&lang=pt

If the images are a fictional production, on the one hand, how to apprehend the reality of the world, on the other, if not through the images? In *Landscape Past Future*, the transformation of reality into an image that the landscapes used at the base of the creative process presupposes, adds the transformation of these same images into new images and, finally, the transformation of images into reality, since the potential return to reality is shaped by the fiction of images that preside over perception (Cauquelin, 1989-2000: 97). *Landscape Past Future* is an exercise in reframing the very concept of "landscape". The aggregated images of Basanta emphatically demonstrate their connection not to an object in the natural world, but to other images that precede them, to other mentioned landscapes, which in turn are heirs of other references. The cycle of recreation of the landscape ends on the universe of artifice, but in doing so it vivifies the sense of mediation, of the *passage* of the landscape, forcing us to rethink about the (dis) connection between a given imaginary or cultural form and sensitive reality: "The landscape is not nature but its manufacture" (Cauquelin, 1989-2000: 105). The creation of the landscape implies, therefore, the use of language: "The "rhetoric", as I understand it here, therefore covers the set of operations that make the objects of perception adequate to the symbolic form: the passage from reality to the image, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the operations carried out on the meaning of the terms. Passing from one term to another by literal association, by addition or subtraction, by contiguity or fragmentation… " (Cauquelin, 1989-2000: 105). In *Dutch Landscape with Tree in Foreground* (2019)[13], the pixelated effect and the mosaic aspect denote both contiguity and fragmentation of terms. On the contrary, *in Dutch Landscape (Cross-hatch)* (2019)[14], the effect of a certain continuity of the features is suggested and the generic visual aspect even evokes the appearance of a (neo) classical painting, or already in transition to modernism, slightly in the style of Turner, looking not like the impression of a digital image, but a painting, perhaps in oil or pastel.

It is curious to note that the aggregated images of Basanta, while mentioning dozens of other landscapes, identified with some precision in the legend, seem to evoke so many references, inviting us to associate each image with a particular style, as a result of concrete operation of synthesis and addition to which the images are subjected. See the cases of *Important Canadian Landscapes: Lakes and Sky* (2019)[15], *Important Canadian Landscapes: Winter scene* (2019)[16] or *Important Canadian Landscapes: Field and Sky* (2019)[17].

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[13] Archival pigment print. 58" x 43". Computer-generated aggregate of 26 Dutch Landscape Paintings, 17th and 18th centuries, collections of the Metropolitan Museum (USA) and the Rijksmuseum (NL).

[14] Archival pigment print. 42" x 28". Computer-generated aggregate of 19 Dutch Landscape Paintings, 17th and 18th centuries, collections of the Metropolitan Museum (USA) and the Rijksmuseum (NL).

[15] Archival pigment print. 28" x 21". Computer-generated aggregate of 19 notable Canadian artworks included in the Sotheby's auction "Important Canadian Art";

[16] Archival pigment print. 28" x 21". Computer-generated aggregate of 12 notable Canadian artworks included in the Sotheby's auction "Important Canadian Art";

[17] Archival pigment print. 28" x 21". Computer-generated aggregate of 31 notable Canadian artworks included in the Sotheby's auction "Important Canadian Art".

These works refer to the pictorial forms of modernism, of Cubist inspiration and, in this case, suggestive in concrete (why not) of landscape painters like Vieira da Silva[18]. The fragment's philosophy (Cauquelin, 1986) seems to preside over the creation of these compositions, suggesting self-referentiality more than the relationship with an object external to the space of representation, the same being true of some of the images based on photographs, especially those that seem subordinate to a grid - *Sliced 19th century photographic vistas* (2019)[19] - or to the corset of geometric shapes - for example, *Collaged 19th century photographic landscapes with trees, palms, and observers* (2019)[20].

Although digital in nature, the images of Basanta, given their visual and aesthetic effect as a whole, still adapt to the already known mental forms (reminiscent of styles, sub-genres, other landscape references), from which we evaluate and we appreciate what we are given to perceive. The perfect "nature" is precisely the one that fits our mental aesthetic schemes. From this point of view, *Landscape Past Future* reinforces the convention of the beautiful, intrinsic to the landscape genre. On the other hand, the autotelic character of the images encloses the observer in an infinite and claustrophobic cycle of self-referentiality (the exercise of aggregating images that the artist proposes may have no end), making it difficult to return to the perceived reality, once the sense of trajectory (*trajectivité*, Berque, 1997; 2011) is absent from the Basanta's work, in which "landscape" is reframed. Seduced by the beauty of the images, on the one hand, the observer wonders, on the other, about their agreement with the idea of "nature", as perceived today. Does the work in question mean the impossibility of returning to the empirical reference, the end of the belief in the idea of nature itself? What meaning does the reproduction of an idea of landscape (and nature) - inappropriate to the perceived world – have nowadays? Does this disagreement cause a restlessness, necessary to redefine the idea of landscape and the idea of nature? What new mental form can we draw today to access the sensitive reality (and its meaning)? In this regard, we can remember the theory of metaphysics of life according to Simmel (1913-2011), which brings back the multiplicity of the sensitive experience, already non-uniform, to typical configurations and paradigmatic correlations, sometimes of harmony and continuity, sometimes of conflict and withdrawal.

First of all, Basanta's landscapes express the landscape crisis. When referring, not to the immediate connection with nature or with the world to see, but to other landscapes-images, as if it were a game of *simulacra*, they point to the impossibility of breaking with the past, with the cultural heritage that mediates our gaze and our

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[18] https://gulbenkian.pt/museu/en/artist/maria-helena-vieira-da-silva-2/

[19] Archival pigment print. 36" x 24". Computer-generated aggregate of 62 Landscape Photographs taken primarily in the United States, as well as Egypt, North Africa, Israel, and Asia, 19th century, collection of the Metropolitan Museum (USA);

[20] Archival pigment print. 14" x 9". Computer-generated aggregate of 25 Landscape Photographs, taken primarily in the United States, as well as Egypt, North Africa, Israel, and Asia, 19th century, collection of the Metropolitan Museum (USA).

thinking. As Henriques (2006: 258) states, it is an "excess of *simulacrum* and fiction that is projected in the relations we have with space, natural or otherwise". Furthermore, by subverting the significant form of the landscapes, both classic and contemporary, which he takes as a reference, the artist's creative exercise invites the observer to dare to re-read these same forms, participating in the joint re-signification of the symbolic devices with which we access to the visible world. Let's look at the following passage:

> His appearance, in the hands of artists or non-artists, does not differ - in any case - from a postcard. What the contemporary artist can do beyond the obsessive desire for mimesis involves not so much the invention of a new landscape but thinking and making visible the crisis of the landscape, thinking about the difficulty of conceiving or producing images that do not fall under the suspicion of an illusion or a *simulacrum* of an immediate contact with the place or with nature (Henriques, 2006: 256).

Landscape Past Future des not invent new landscapes, but it challenges us to recreate the meaning of the concept of "landscape" itself. Have the landscape's signifying forms been emptied of meaning? Is the landscape today confined to a mere aesthetic-formal exercise that refers to an imaginary without correspondence with the world we inhabit today? Will art have the function of preserving the collective memory of a sensitive universe whose conditions of access (and production of meaning) are already extinct? Does the phenomenon of the progressive extinction of the natural world result in the disappearance of the idea of landscape? On the website of the *gnration*[21] art gallery, at the time of the artist's exhibition in Braga (Portugal), between 23 October and 12 January 2020, it was possible to read: "At a time when the natural world is collapsing under the weight of human attempts to conquer it, landscape painting and its romantic association with bucolic nature are reconstructed in a digital universe of preservation: a virtual *simulacrum* that contrasts with our testimony of the disappearance of the natural world". As Henriques (2006: 264) would say, "Perhaps the space for the poetic landscape is becoming more and more difficult, perhaps there is no other way but the way of irony…".

Another question, perhaps even more radical, that can be asked, is related to the transformations of the human ontological status, since today we live hopelessly equipped with innumerable technological devices of prosthetic character, which configure our experience. In the field of cyberculture, some authors reflect, precisely, on the new conditions of contemporary experience. Among them, Katherine Hayles (1999), in *How We Became Posthuman - Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, discusses the new possibilities of embodiment. The author asks, "What is the posthuman? (…) First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, considered as the seat of human identity in the Western

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[21] https://www.gnration.pt/en/search/basanta/?noredirect=en_US

tradition… Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate… Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines "(Hayles, 1999: 2-3). From the point of view of the gradual emptying of our sensitive and immediate connection with the surrounding world, given that we live increasingly immersed in the technological experience, reflecting on the new conditions of the embodiment means reflecting on the new ways of producing the very idea of "landscape". Today, we can think of technology as co-constitutive, both from our ontology, in Haraway's perspective (Bell, 2007) and from our experience (Selinger, 2006), which means that technology is an agent in the semiosic creation of our relationship with the world, real and imaginary. We speak of an intelligent technology, capable of "learning" within the post-phenomenological process of (re) creation, and technological co-creation, based on pre-established elements, exceeding, in a certain way, the expectations of "programming" as initially planned. As we could say, regarding the Basanta project: "Using metadata filtering and machine learning techniques, small sets of landscape paintings are identified and classified". From this point of view, Basanta's proposal contradicts the understanding of the Simmelian landscape, according to which the landscape is above all a feeling - *Stimmung* - experienced in the human relationship with nature. More precisely, the images in *Landscape Past Future* are co-created through a process of using computational techniques of image aggregation whose produced results "surprise" the artist, which means that it is the autotelic relationship between the artist, the imaginary that serves as the basis for creative production and the technological performance (according to some mechanical procedures and dispensing the connection with the visible world) that perform, together, the landscape.

3. Final Notes

A possibility of reading Basanta's landscapes, in *Landscape Past Future*, consists in recognizing in them, in a way, the expression of the contemporary crisis of the landscape. Today, on a global scale, conditions of impossibility of a balanced connection to the natural world are discussed. The effects of climate change, originally caused by human action, are devastating at the ecological, biological, anthropological, socio-economic level, but also at the philosophical and cultural level. Losing our connection with the natural world, but also with the surrounding world to see, including our relationship with the urban landscape, especially in large cities, can be translated, in turn, in our inability to transform perception into landscape, which is to say, in our inability to make sense of the world to see. Today, our gaze is a lost gaze, unable to identify and create connections between the loose and disarticulated observed elements. The houses, the trees, the rivers, the roads, the bridges, the rhythms of movement and the unpredictability of the atmospheric cycles, the "natural" and social political catastrophes, the buildings, the artefacts, compete with each other

tensely and disorderly, producing a feeling of generalized helplessness in face of the possibility of building perspective and understanding of the inhabited world. As Fontcuberta (2005, p. 6) would say: "The landscape is the expression of the place; place as inhabited space, space made culture, space appropriated by consciousness. The genre, as a whole, begins to disappear when we question the political, cultural and aesthetic conditions that transform the environment, in effect into landscape. The landscape crisis, today, is linked to the feeling of loss of natural space".

Besides the feeling of breaking with the natural it should be discussed the contemporary technological experience of everyday life, at least that which takes the place of the *other* and becomes the absolute place of contingency and sensology (Perniola, 1993). Such an experience usually replaces the immediate sensitive experience of connecting with the world. However, *Landscape Past Future* challenges us to think about technology from another perspective. Firstly, Basanta proposes an exercise in which technology is not the counterpoint of aesthetics or experience, but, on the contrary, it is part of that same experience. Kwastek (2013) argues, precisely, about the interaction in digital art as an aesthetic experience. By proposing a digital work of art in the form of visual arts, framed and hung on the gallery wall, Basanta invites the observer to assume the posture of contemplation inherent in a given relationship, already codified, traditional and expected, with the looking target. The level of interaction with the work, first of all, produces an effect in the thought it arouses, as a result of reading the work and all the elements that serve as an anchor: the captions, the text of the room sheet. In addition, some screens showing videos and the artist's discourse about his own creative process are included in the exhibition syntax. It is also important to discuss the bodily relationship with the work, considering the movement of approaching-distancing in the exhibition context which allows, sometimes the observation of detail, now the more panoramic view. In any case, this contemplative-type interaction, which *Landscape Past Future* fosters, surprises by the trans-disciplinarity (Craenen, 2016) that it calls for. From analogic screens to digital screens, from new media art to visual arts, Basanta's work under discussion crosses the boundaries of a particular artistic field, proposing with this same movement an exercise in redefining, first of all, the discipline (in this case, digital art or new media art) of departure. More precisely, the artist suggests that new media art can be perceived by affinity with fine arts, considering, in particular, the landscape genre, that is, the artistic practice of representing our relationship, sensitive or imagined, with the natural or inhabited world. Thus, a new understanding of new media art is proposed, according to which it can potentially lend expression to the sense of landscape and to the collective imaginary, in this case, which produces that same meaning. Secondly, it is our perception of the idea of landscape, as represented throughout the history of the visual arts, painting and photography, which is in turn challenged to transform itself. The landscapes in question provoke us insofar as they seem to contradict the understanding that the landscape would be the expression of a purely subjective feeling of connection to nature, in Simmel's perspective, presenting itself, on the

contrary, as an expression of an collective imaginary that self-references itself, disconnected from the contemporary world to see. The expression of this apparent split between the universe of representation and the sensitive universe constitutes, ironically, a new possibility for art to summon the observer to the urgency of rethinking the importance of restoring its connection with the surrounding world, which means the importance of (re) defining the meaning (and feeling) of the landscape.

Basanta's landscapes are already post-landscapes. We are instilled with the suspicion of a total fictionalization that has nothing to do with our lived experience. New media art, acting as a new language to represent an endangered experience, play an important role, alerting us to the urgency of thinking about this same loss: "What rescues them from the dangers of irony - exile in relativity, pure denial and boredom - it is the vitality and urgency of your mood: at a time when we receive constant warnings about the exhaustion of the natural world, transforming the landscape into the hallucination of a computer can also be an effective warning form (we just needed to call you Hal)"(Henriques, 2006: 258).

Landscape Past Future makes purposeful reference to a type of representation strongly rooted in Western culture. We could apply to Basanta's landscapes the following observation of Henriques (2006: 260), in reference to the photographs of Augusto Alves da Silva, composing the series 3.16: "The historical tradition of the landscape is summarily summoned, redone and put under suspicion".

Invoking the history of the visual representation of the landscape, *Landscape Past Future*, taking to the extreme the sense of recomposition, based on the deconstruction and recombination of pre-figured landscapes, aiming at the creation of new meanings, alerts us to the transformations of perception and appreciation of the landscape. Quoting Sales (2006: 299), we could say: "Today the landscape is not seen in the same way as individuals of three centuries ago. The same space no longer inspires the same meditations and no longer suggests the same type of contemplation". Furthermore, it is the very history of the media, and its implications for the transformation of perception, what the work also calls for. Showing digital images aggregated from both pictorial and photographic landscapes, the artist draws attention to the importance of the *medium* himself in the history of landscape representation, inscribing the new media art in the (dis) continuity (or in the line of permanent remediation), of that same tradition. As an example, Sales (2006) refers to the role of photography and cinema in altering landscape perception. Considering photography, states the author: "Photography allowed the decomposition of movement and made the gaze familiar with a whole series of angles and points of view (…) the view from the balloon, than the plane, completely changed the way of building the landscape" (Sales, 2006: 301). On the kinetic vision, conditioned by cinema and television, the following can be read: "Between the 40s and 50s and the end of the 20th century, the angles diversify to the rhythm of the montage that makes that the view of young people should be

constructed in another way and that the attitude towards reading a clip is not the same" (Sales, 2006: 301).

Provided with an intense aesthetic sense, Basanta's landscapes seem to want to contribute to the rehabilitation of the idea of "beautiful", not without, at the same time, giving it a tragic character. We could describe this tension with the following words: "The rehabilitation of the beautiful is inscribed in the desire to rediscover, at the end of the era of deconstructions, a new principle of order, present in the taste for small things, in the praise of the simple, in the appreciation of the essential (…) But for the rehabilitation of the beautiful of nature, the entirely specific factor that in our time lives with dramatism contributed decisively: the strong awareness of nature as a reality that is in danger (…) The involvement of human beings in nature becomes, devoid of supernaturalist support, sympathetic to the condition of this natural which is not limited to contemplating and enjoying, but which is also an essential part of us and whose destiny we share"(Serrão, 2013: 136).

Finally, we could say that *Landscape Past Future* is a manifest of defending the sense of urgency to recover the landscape, at the same time as the melancholy expression of its finitude. The impossibility of the sensitive experience of landscape - in today's unsustainable world that transformed that same experience into a pure mnemonic ruin - is offset by the imperative need to preserve the collective imaginary, a last resort to raise awareness of the importance of the landscape in the process of constant redefinition of our own ontology[22]. Let us recall Simmel (1913-2011), according to which the human condition is constituted in the tension between life and forms[23] and let us quote, once more, the words of Sales: "The landscape is a reading where many readings intersect and, ultimately, that of his own death. The landscape can remain in its materiality, but it has disappeared because nobody appreciates it more, nor contemplates it more. [As such], we understand better the object of its conservation" (Sales, 2006: 299)[24].

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[22] The ontology of existence in Feuerbach shows the intervention of the variety of natural phenomena in the modelling of feeling and in its multiple unfolding: "Ontology prepares for the dignification and promotion of the world, a world of subjects who are also objects, not as opposed to thought or the devoid of thought, but simply as a function of each position in relation to the other, which converts the sensible reality into a fabric of interrelations, under the original mode of subjectivity-objectivity of all existing" (Serrão, 2013: 49).

[23] "Aesthetic contemplation brings together the subjective experiences of an individual who is also an objective existence, therefore, always at risk of being diluted in anonymity or uniformity, but at the same time aiming to safeguard the peculiar identity, his individual law. Conflict underlies both modes, for Simmel, founder and unappealable as a tragedy of life, but also the open possibility of becoming a living form, being a whole in every moment of the process of existence, in the very heart of dispersion and dissociation. The real opposition is not simply between life and form, but between living form and crystallized forms" (Serrão, 2013: 34).

[24] Summing up, it is interesting to note the artist's statement: "My work investigates technology as a meeting point of concurrent, overlapping systems; a nexus of cultural, computational, biological, and

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economic forces. In uncovering, augmenting, and creating systems of intertwinement, I am trying to touch a sense of "liveness" or a nearly-living quality, the dynamism resulting from the unpredictable performances of various actants pulling independently in collective balance.

Through a variety of media - installation, kinetic sculpture, sound, computational image-making - I employ the visual culture of commercial technologies as a core vocabulary, displacing them into an artistic context. Placing technologies in unconventional and absurd relationships to one another, I aim to create a fissure in their conventional functions, reflecting on their roles as contemporary prosthetics with which we co-exist in a hybrid ecology.

My research and creation processes involve a balance of qualitative and quantitative approaches. I am particularly interested in the interplay between the two seemingly polar-opposite, binary viewpoints, and strive towards a cross-pollination in which one feeds and complicates the other, and vice versa" (Retrieved from: http://adambasanta.com/bio).

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