Stourhead (detail), 2023

The Grandeur
of Limitless Landscapes

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For the art of gardening to be elevated to the rank of fine art, it had to do more than simply separate itself from every useful end. It also had to satisfy the criterion through which beautiful works are recognized. In other words, it had to imitate nature – or, rather, "beautiful nature", which is not satisfied with reproducing the traits that render things recognizable, but goes further and assembles the traits, borrowed from the most beautiful models, into a perfect figure that is not to be found in simple nature.

– Jacques Rancière, *The Time of the Landscape*, 2023, p.5

Well-known for his large-scale, immersive landscape artworks that blend traditional photography with computational techniques, might Daniel Ambrosi be said to ride that 'perfect figure' when seeking to render the landscape *visible*?

As Baudrillard put it some four decades ago, the Borges fable, 'in which the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly … has come full-circle for us, and possesses nothing but the charm of second-order simulacra'. As we move through the successive phases of the image, we are no longer surprised by the absence of a profound reality, and perhaps less so when the image is its own pure simulacrum. Nor, of course, should we forget John Berger's adroit critique of Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (c.1750) – whereby the 'philosophic enjoyment of unperverted Nature' is typically preconditioned by the possession of private land.

Today's possession of land occurs doubly. The same landowning rights persist, but equally the *new* cartographers are the large corporations and start-ups photographing every inch of the globe for the generation of geographic information systems. As a counterpoint, Ambrosi has sought to improvise upon such vast systems. Not only does he create his own photographic 'datapoints', but he draws this data through numerous layers – stitching together a *collaboration* with the higher dimensional mathematics of artificial intelligence. If we think of how MRI scans render the 'landscape' of the body into thousands of finely sliced images, through which like a movie we can move back and forth, Ambrosi could be understood to move *virtually* through multiple and vast natural environments, ostensibly traversing near infinite terrains.

Jacques Rancière argues that the 'landscape' as a specific object is not simply some-*thing*, as referenced in numerous textual descriptions over centuries, but rather emerged at a specific time, coinciding with the new discourse of aesthetics. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in 1790 offers one point of departure. Kant attributes painting as a 'formative art', whereby it 'presents *sensible appearance* in artful combination with ideas', which he divides into 'the beautiful *arrangement* of its products'. Furthermore, he posits, this work is also undertaken in '*landscape gardening*'. Kant echoes what is already starting to be recognised (e.g. in the writings of Thomas Whately, Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld, and Jacques Delille). Whately, for example, remarked: 'Gardening, in the perfection to which it has lately been brought in England, is entitled to a place of considerable rank among the liberal arts'.

In his contemporary AI-renders for his exhibition of artworks based on the landscapes of Capability Brown, we might want to suppose Ambrosi has *added* to such perfection, having 'transposed' our viewpoint through the hyperreal light of the Californian sky. Whatever one's *sensing* of these works, at stake is the question of 'unity in variety'. As Rancière explains, this tension is critical to the emerging discourse of landscape gardening and the 'picturesque' in the 18th century.

Capability Brown, for example, a noted influence for Ambrosi, was instrumental in moving away from the formal, symmetrical gardens popular of the period. Instead, Brown introduced a style of design that sought to emulate natural beauty, albeit in a highly curated form. Ambrosi seeks to uphold Brown's ability to curate unity in variety, or to 'shape reality'. Yet, interestingly, Brown was criticised by his peers. For some, his gardens were considered too smooth and undulating, lacking in curiosity and concealment. As Rancière puts it, 'the gaze must be bounded in a way that does not allow it to see the limit of what it is looking at. There must be a limit that conceals the limit'. For Ambrosi, the 'limit' that conceals the limit of the pictured space is arguably the *limitlessness* of AI, which reveals a whole new vista; it places us in a very different timespace.

The emergence of the 18th century landscape discourse is bound up with a tension between the liberal and mechanical arts. 'The latter,' Rancière remarks, 'produced objects that served the needs of human beings, while the former provided pleasure to those whose spheres of existence extended beyond the simple circle of

needs'. Today, the crafted and mechanical are of apiece in an art practice such as with Ambrosi, which in turn produces new effects of the *picturesque* and the *grand* (terms typically forgotten from Kant's aesthetics, as opposed to the much-used terms of beauty and the sublime):

> *The picturesque tends toward its own overcoming, toward a state in which the happy combination of varied objects is abolished in a holistic effect: the* grandeur *that reduces this variety to a unity that neutralizes the individuality of the objects and their qualities. The same process erases likewise the usual link between cause and effect, according to which a particular spectacle produces the corresponding effects of pleasure or pain. [...]...this "grandeur" produces a specific effect: rather than the landscape seeming vaster than it actually is, it is now the mind that is enlarged. The way travelers describe it, this enlarging of the mind first manifests itself in a state of stupor and unnamable happiness.*
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> – Jacques Rancière, *The Time of the Landscape*, 2023, p.54

As Ambrosi describes in interview, when a scene suddenly comes together (or, we might say, when we encounter its 'grandeur') it sets 'alarm bells' ringing in his head. Traditional photography, he remarks, struggles to capture such pensive moments, hence his remarkable travels through the multi-dimensionality of a long-term provocative and *collaborative* AI practice.