

From the Edge of a Cartesian Landscape

Bas Princen & Milica Topalovic

THE GEOGRAPHY OF PARADISE

It is not precisely known how many individual palm trees there are in the world but the biological family is extensive and diverse. Palms comprise around two thousand six hundred known species, even up to three and a half thousand according to some estimates. Most are confined to tropical and temperate climates where they inhabit nearly every type of habitat from rainforests to deserts.¹

However only few species of palm trees go with the compulsory blue sky and sea, such as the one John Baldessari tirelessly replicated in his works including the 'Palm Tree Seascape' (2010), the ones Edward Ruscha photographed for 'A Few Palm Trees' (1971) or the ones David Hockney painted in the mise-en-scène of 'A Bigger Splash' (1967).

This is the tree that has dominated the Western imagination, the urban palm residing by the poolside in condominiums and resorts. Synonymous with wealth and power, it appears as embroidery on both bathrobes and military uniforms. Land-sea drawings of Palm Islands cast an artificial emblem for satellite photography, transforming the specific geography into a common imaginary. Palms are the ingredient of the better cities, the sign of permanent leisure, of the early retirement and the Sun Belt. They are the palm trees of the LAs, Miamis, and Dubais of the world.

Since the beginning of time, since the story of Genesis, the palm has been the 'Tree of Life', the sacred tree of fertility and longevity, a symbol of spiritual victory over flesh and of peace in the aftermath of conflict. On the

cover of 'Atlante' by Luigi Ghirri, there is a map showing an archetypal locus, a way through a desert towards an oasis. The silhouettes of palm trees in a desert appear as the first sign of water and shade, a promise of human presence and urbanity.

As a modern archetype, the palm stands at the intersection of wealth, tropicality and leisure. A palm is the 'Edenic Residue', the organic myth of the Generic City, the marker of the contemporary geography of paradise.

But there are other palm trees.

¹ Wikipedia: Arecaceae, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arecaceae>, accessed: 05.02.2014.

Photograph: Bas Princen, Oil palm production forest # 7, (FELDA Taib Andak, Malaysia), 2013



From the Edge of a Cartesian Landscape

THE GEOGRAPHY OF PRODUCTION

If classified not according to the principles of botany, but according to their place in the geography of urbanization, then next to the city palm a wide variety of other types can be distinguished. Among them are the palm species found 'in the wild', the palms of the rural areas, as well as the species of the production forests, the worker-palms. One such worker-palm is *Elaeis guineensis*, the oil palm.

The oil palm is nearly anonymous; it inhabits landscapes that are mostly unseen, only an occasional disaster might bring them into view. «Your cooking oil may be contributing to the haze», reads a billboard in Singapore, hinting at the annual burning of jungle and plantations some two hundred kilometres eastwards on Sumatra, an event which pushes the air pollution in the city-state to hazardous levels.

The lived realities of palm plantations are inevitably blurred through the press reporting and other available information. According to UN figures¹ the oil palm territory has doubled every ten years since the 1960s. It now covers an area three and a half times the

size of Switzerland, most of it located in Malaysia and Indonesia. Ninety percent of the global production is traded on financial markets, making the palm oil an ideal generic commodity, a universal ingredient found in food products, oleochemicals and bio-fuels.

The data additionally informs that the production of a single tree typically averages thirty litres per year, and that per capita annual consumption of palm oil in the European Union is nearly sixty litres. One might imagine the statistically average EU citizen as a patron of two oil palms in Southeast Asia.

Ultimately, how is one to perceive, experience and conceptualize the space of the production forests? More broadly, how is one to understand the space of the world's agro-industrial hinterlands? This space appears opaque, hidden from view in areas away from big cities and in clandestine spaces of exception, such as the free trade zones or export processing zones that operate under 'special rules' and 'flexible labour' regimes. Seen from a distance, from the self-declared 'post-industrial' and 'post-working class' societies, and through the lenses of the popular techno-

scientific representations, these production territories seem homogenised and undifferentiated. They seem to lack both the social and natural characteristics, they appear as Cartesian, technical landscapes without geographic aberrations, without specificities: a uniform pattern on a map, a grainy texture on Google Earth.

Precisely this ostensibly unspecific geography is the crucial economic terrain. Tied in to the infrastructures of processing, logistics and trade, its economic utilisation seems to be helped by abstraction from the concrete realities on the ground. It is easily mystified as a space of 'deterritorialised' and 'reterritorialised' production, a part of the technological 'space of flows', and of 'weightless economy' of trade. Through such elaborately distorted representations, production spaces are conceptually neutralised from the meanings of locality, of place, of ground. They become spaces reduced to economic transactions.

¹ UNCTAD: Palm Oil Facts and Figures, <http://www.unctad.info/en/Infocomm/AACP-Products/Palm-oil/>, accessed: 05.02.2014

Photograph: Bas Princen, Oil palm production forest # 5, (FELDA Taib Andak, Malaysia), 2013



From the Edge of a Cartesian Landscape

REPRESENTING LANDSCAPES OF PRODUCTION

In the West labour is generally missing and hidden from view. Indeed, «the disappearance of labour and production from the broader social imaginary»¹ is a widespread cultural symptom of the postindustrial world. Despite diverse traditions of depicting labour and production in modern art – ranging from photography documenting the transformation of the American frontier, to the social realist art in the Soviet Union centred on the new Soviet worker, and to the conceptual and minimal works of Bernd and Hilla Becher recording the disappearance of industrial architecture in the 1960s and 1970s – the late 20th century marks a shift in cultural production. Mirroring the traumatic deindustrialisation of the West, production and labour as categories of artistic engagement diminished. In the post-industrial society, within the postmodernist preoccupations with popular culture, commodity, aesthetics, identity, gender, and so on, «large segments of labour and production were in fact concealed from common view since they were exported to the geo-political «margins»».²

In the 1990s a renewed interest in the economic subject, this time the globalised commodity production and distribution, gradually returns to North American and Western European art. Photographic works, as distinct from each other as Allan Sekula's text-image essays on the global shipping industry («Fish Story», 1995) and Andreas Gursky's monumental scenes of manufacturing (Nha Trang, Vietnam, 2004), share the same basic effort to find an image for the the ostensibly endless, volatile and unmappable subject of global capitalism.

It can be argued that this effort is continuing, and remains critical. The production landscapes in particular still remain abstract, distant and hidden from view. The scale, specificities and lived realities of territories, such as the oil palm forests, remain largely uncomprehended or unknown. How could then one extend the «ethics of visibility» from cities to these territories? How can one create an «index of the hidden and the unfamiliar» for the production forests?³

No doubt, production landscapes are not the «absolute space» of nature that they once were. They are socially produced space, the «second nature» shaped by human activity, conceptualised and inscribed into representation. This may seem to render any exploration dubious, and even curiosity itself superfluous. As Luigi Ghirri wrote: «By now, all the paradise islands dear to literature and to our hopes have already been described, and the only possible discovery or journey seems to be that of discovering the discovery already made.»

But this perception is incomplete and the opposite is true. Even within the most codified world of the already-lived and seemingly totalising experience, «infinite readings are always possible».⁴ The production landscapes should be seen as a new frontier for the «second age of exploration»⁵ and a new kind of curiosity for the landscapes of the planet. Furthermore, there is a need «to resist a perception of seriality, and that neither the self nor the group has any real power to effect change, that someone else far away is always preventing it. Instead, it would map and affirm its own limited powers in the larger network of seemingly inhuman, cybernetic global social relations».⁶ Global capitalism is not a Cartesian space or the infinity of Spi-

noza. And though it sometimes feels that way, this can only be grounds for greater curiosity rather than inertia.

What is also required is a fresh inquisitive view that finds its expression in representation that is neither purely scientific and objective nor expressive and subjective: instead of a distant and mediated view, a close-up and a «zero degree observation». This may be a new kind of realism – neither «social realism» nor «critical realism» – but the one of looking and making visible the concrete reality, the lived space, the ground.

The oil palm is an image, an object whose possible meaning is not yet fixed. It should not be mistaken for the icon of tropicality and leisure, but it should also not be dismissed as a symbol of indifference and hypertrophy of global consumption. Instead, the oil palm could be seen the marker of a new geography of the under-represented and the unfamiliar; an image that suggests a possible transformation and still evoking the excitement of the unknown.

What are the hidden stories of the production forests?

- 1 Bill Roberts, «Production in View: Allan Sekula's «Fish Story» and the Thawing of Postmodernism», London: Tate Papers 2012, Issue 18. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/production-view-allan-sekulas-fish-story-and-thawing-postmodernism>, accessed: 05.02.2014.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Taryn Simon, «An American Index of the Hidden and the Unfamiliar», Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz 2013.
- 4 Luigi Ghirri, «Atlante», Milano / New York: Charta 2000.
- 5 Karen Marha, «The Master Interviewer. Introduction», «Surface», vol. 104, pp. 124–133.
- 6 Fredric Jameson, Miyoshi Masao, «The Cultures of Globalization», Durham / London: Duke University Press Books 1999, p. 352.

Photograph: Bas Princen, Oil palm production forest # 6, (FELDA Taib Andak, Malaysia), 2013

Bas Princen, born 1975, is a photographer focusing on landscapes in transformation.

Milica Topalovic, born 1971, is an Assistant Professor at the ETH Future Cities Laboratories.

