

Nature as Creator in Alan Sonfist's Time Landscape

Catherine Sky

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Dr Letha Ch'ien

Alan Sonfist's site specific artwork, *Time Landscape*, 1965 challenges the distinctions between art and nature, city and wilderness, past and present. In doing so, the piece compels viewers to consider their place within these dichotomies and to consider taking individual and communal action in furthering its reach. To understand *Time Landscape* and its relationship with its site, one must approach the piece from a geoaesthetic framework to recognize nature as an agentic force in the creative process. In this paper, I will reflect on the relationship between the site, nature and the artist as co-creators of the piece.

Time Landscape occupies a 45x200 foot rectangle at the Northwest corner of Houston and LaGuardia Place in Greenwich Village, New York City. There is a fence around the perimeter and visitors are not allowed inside. The interior is planted densely with trees, including Red Oak, White Oak, Cedar, Elm and Birch. Shrubs and ground covering plants such as Sassafras, Dogwood, Sumac, Mugwort, Virginia Creeper, and Goldenrod occupy the middle and lower levels. In its present form, the trees have reached maturity and create a thick canopy which shades the ground. The subsequent layers of plants are also mature with full growth that obstruct views of the surrounding traffic, and buildings. *Time Landscape* changes with the seasons, and light as would any forest, giving it a constantly changing palette of colors and textures. Depending on the time of year, viewers will see birds, insects and other wildlife. The site is currently managed by the New York Department of Parks and Recreation and is marked similarly to other city parks with green signage and for this reason the piece is often overlooked, as a small park or overgrown lot.

Time Landscape was conceived by Alan Sonfist in 1965, when as a young artist, he began reflecting on the loss of the indigenous ecosystem due to urbanization. As a child, Sonfist experienced a strong connection to the natural environment due to the freedom with which he was allowed to roam the old growth forests still existing in the public parks in 1950s era New York. At the age of 19 he proposed the project as a memorial to the plants, streams, rivers and wildlife that had occupied New York City before the arrival of European settlers. In doing so, Sonfist caused the city agencies that oversee public land to widen the scope of a civic monument to include the non-human elements of Manhattan's history.

While Sonfist garnered initial support from many community leaders as well as curators from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the project waited thirteen years for approval. Between its initial proposal in 1965 and the final approval in 1978, Sonfist engaged in a conceptual process of research and design that included numerous drawings, paintings, photographs and installations. He also enlisted the assistance of botanists, ecologists, historians and community partners and included plans for restored landscapes at 50 different sites around the city. He imagined these would be "small pockets within the dense urban fabric that could be returned to a moment in time prior to European settlement." While unrealized, the drawings of these 50 sites stand as a testament to Sonfist's concept.

Time landscape challenges the distinction between art and nature by making nature the primary visible element of the artwork. What we see is a city lot, full of trees with a fence around it. This may lead us to wonder what sets this piece apart from a garden, park or habitat restoration? Why do we call it art? Some critics place Time

Landscape in the context of socially engaged art practice, which involves people and communities in debate, collaboration, social interaction or activism. This framework certainly contributes to our understanding of the piece as a collaborative effort between the artist and the community to question norms and provoke change regarding the place of nature in the urban landscape. However, this interpretation is contingent upon knowing the history and background of the piece. Without it we are left simply with the visible; a tree filled city lot with a fence around it. For this reason, I feel that a geoaesthetic reading is necessary for understanding and appreciating this piece. Geoaesthetic criticism holds that the landscape has agentic power in the creation of an artwork. In the case of Time Landscape, the work began as a collaboration between the artist, the city and the ecosystem. In time, the artist was able to step back and allow the landscape to become the primary creator.

I believe that what sets Time Landscape apart from basic landscape architecture and elevates it to the level of fine art is precisely this idea that the natural systems are allowed free reign. This may seem like a contradiction in terms until one grasps the true meaning of geoaesthetics as the acceptance of nature as a creative force. A comparison to New York's Central Park, considered an exemplary naturalistic urban park, illustrates the extent to which Time Landscape allows nature to have agency. Frederick Law Olmstead, Central Park's designer, was a staunch believer in the importance of connecting city dwellers with nature and Central Park provides a graceful escape from the urban grid with rocky outcrops, meandering paths, and water features. However, the meadows and pastures, rowing ponds and arched bridges refer to a eurocentric pastoral aesthetic that Sonfist's piece soundly rejects. There are no paths,

benches or water features in Time Landscape. Nature seems to be given complete agency and the artist provides no interface for human participation except for a fence around the piece. Time Landscape is like no other park or monument in that it is a living fragment of the indigenous landscape that was erased by colonialism. It was the artist's intention that this replacing of the displaced landscape would become a model for decolonizing the land.

Another artwork that provides an interesting contrast to Time Landscape is Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield*, 1982 which was influenced by Sonfist's work. Denes was given access to two acres near the World Trade Center on land slated for high end development. With a team of assistants, Denes cleared the debris and planted, tended and harvested what was eventually 1000 pounds of wheat which she distributed to people around the world through exhibition of the seeds in art galleries. Her piece relates to Sonfist's work in its questioning of land use in the context of urban development. And similarly, it relies on the natural processes that contribute to agriculture. However, while the landscape is without a doubt a co-creator in Denes' piece, its agency is limited by anthropomorphic ends while Time Landscape leaves nature alone to tell its own story.

Thus, the reliance on the agentive forces of nature in Time Landscape allows us to ask interesting questions as we consider de Certeau's distinction between place and space. Certeau's contention that space is a practiced place seems to me to be informed by human-centric metaphors - the map, the street, the bridge, the frontier. Stories, a human invention, are most often told in human terms. But Time Landscape asks us to think of the site in terms of non-human characters and the stories they tell. The stories

of plants are certainly spatial. Though rooted to a particular spot, trees act upon their place through tessellations of lateral growth, expanding upward and downward through the soil. Their seeds, transported by animals, wind and water colonize new places but in many cases stay connected through intricate systems of roots and fungi. Birds and insects map an area through their attraction to seeds and nectar and pollination is by all means a purposeful action taken upon a place. All of this happens whether or not people are around, and the beauty of Sonfist's work is that this simple fact is there for the noticing at the corner of LaGuardia and Houston.

While I have argued that Time Landscape illustrates the agentic nature of the landscape, it must be noted that certain conditions exist that contradict the totality of nature's free reign in this piece. While it has gone further than most site specific artworks to present nature as primary creator, the reality is that Time Landscape ultimately owes its continued existence to the city agencies which approved and funded its creation and have allowed it to stay on a piece of highly sought after Greenwich Village property. In this way, City Landscape bears the marks of a large-scale city-funded project which, unlike the old growth forests of Sonfist's youth, endures, perhaps because its message has been received and the city values this work enough to allow it to stay. Similarly, the piece also requires maintenance as it ages and while symbolizing wilderness, it is in fact, facilitated by volunteers who somewhat ironically remove non-indigenous plant species that find their way in. Thus, as the piece ages it asks new questions, which in my opinion adds dimension to its message. Is there such a thing as authenticity in wilderness? What is the role of humans in ensuring the existence of wilderness?

In this way, the piece reminds us that humans are indeed a necessary element in the wild landscape, a truth that modern ecologists have finally understood to include indigenous people who in tending the wilderness, also shaped it to meet their needs. In her book *Tending the Wild*, Kat Anderson documents the ways in which indigenous people were and continue to be in an interdependent relationship with the landscape. Practices such as selecting and propagating beneficial plants, ensuring population balance through hunting and gathering and using fire to control overgrowth demonstrate that the relationship between humans and the natural landscape has always been collaborative.

Thus we can appreciate the fact that there is an inherent tension between the notion of city and wilderness in Time Landscape where neither is allowed complete sovereignty. Sociologist Keven Loughran writes of those which he terms imbricated spaces, where both city and nature are active agents in their creation. This speaks to a new conception of urban spaces which blend layers of nature with the built environment, often as a result of urban decay. Loughran cites the High Line in Manhattan as one such space where a city-nature hybrid has reclaimed former dilapidated train tracks to become a culturally valued place. In much the same way, a new appreciation of the interaction between the urban and the natural has been applied to Time Landscape through the celebration of its 50 year anniversary with a number of gallery exhibitions of Sonfist's supporting drawings, paintings, photographs and sculptures.

While New York has not, to date, allowed any more Time Landscapes to be built, Sonfist has had the chance to create others in cities across the US and Europe which he describes as "nature theater" or "monuments of observation," where natural patterns

such as bird migrations and seasonal changes can be returned to the city dwellers' consciousness. Writer Rebecca Solnit claims that the purpose of Time Landscape is to show viewers "not just how the landscape looks but how it works."

It is this focus on learning from the landscape while allowing it to restore itself that elevates Time Landscape to the status of art. Gallery Director, Todd Alden refers to the piece as a "monument to the history of nature that's not a park or a garden"...but a "creative concept for a larger way of thinking" In this way the piece continues to challenge viewers to expand their notion of community to include the non-human participants, especially those that have been lost. In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes about the language Ojibwe Tribe of upstate New York of which she is a member. In the Ojibwe language the word for river is not a noun but a verb, as in "to be a river." This illustrates the cultural belief of the Ojibwe that natural systems are animate beings. I believe that this reconceptualizing of the landscape as a living system, lies close to the geoaesthetic reading of Sonfist's Time Landscape. This artwork asks viewers to conceive of the site, itself as a creative force that is systematically aligned with all of its inhabitants. Thus, the site brings the piece into being.

In conclusion, Alan Sonfist's piece, Time Landscape is a civic monument quite unlike any other. In returning a plot of land in Manhattan to its pre colonial state, Sonfist has brought the past into the present while causing us to consider what has been lost. Most importantly, the piece asks us to recognize the agency of the landscape itself. A geoaesthetic framework allows us to understand this piece as a co-creation between artist and landscape, city and nature, past and present. This understanding represents a crack in the anthropomorphic/extraction model of seeing the landscape solely for what it

offers humans. Instead, by illuminating the symbiotic relationship that has existed between people and natural places for millenia, it provides a model for reevaluating our relationship with the natural world.

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