

# A Poetic Landscape for the Next Millennium.

From architecture to art, poetry and philosophy.

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When asked to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures at Harvard about the future of literature, Calvino came up with six qualities depicting them through several literary examples. He titled them "Six Memos for the Next Millennium."

Similarly, we recognize several architectural sensations resulting from a composition of expressive qualities that are common to several works of architecture, independently of their typologies, construction techniques, or materials, although these elements enter into the aesthetic composition.

Central to our argument is the link established by Deleuze & Guattari

between territory, matters of expression and the composition of sensations to define what we name a "Poetic Landscape," following the idea of the becoming-expressive of the territory and how the territorial marks and the territory-house system are at the origin of art. We will analyse a landscape located in a cold and icy land through the presentation of works by Peter Zumthor in order to contribute to the notion of Poetic Landscape addressing the values and qualities for the next millennium.

Key words:

Poetic Landscape, Aesthetics, Sensation, Zumthor, Deleuze.

In his poem "Six Significant Landscapes" (1916), Wallace Stevens invites us to see several landscapes, among which one is usually represented by Chinese painters, in particular of the Southern Song (or Late Song) school, which flourished between the end of century XII and the XIII century. In the poem, an old man quietly sitting in the shade of a pine tree, observes the flowers at the edge of the shade and how they move with the gusts of wind (like brushstrokes), while the water slides through the weeds.

An old man sits  
 In the shadow of a pine tree  
 In China.  
 He sees larkspur,  
 Blue and white,  
 At the edge of the shadow,  
 Move in the wind.  
 His beard moves in the wind.  
 The pine tree moves in the wind.  
 Thus water flows  
 Over weeds.

"The poem, like the Chinese painting it represents, portrays a single impression: consciousness of the unity of all created things,"<sup>11</sup> says Zhaoming Qiang. Moreover: "The man who sees the larkspur moving in the wind suddenly, in the flash of a single thought, is no longer aware of himself. He is that larkspur, the larkspur that reveals universal reality."<sup>12</sup> In his poem, Wallace Stevens creates a landscape, simultaneously poetic and visual (one of his many examples of ekphrasis - the literary representation of a visual representation), which allows the reader not only to see the landscape (which is the representation of that other painted) before his eyes while reading, but also to feel the landscape gradually unfolding him. As the seating man, he/she becomes flower, pine tree, wind and water, double singularities of the Chinese landscape and painting, which evoke the unity between man and nature.

In 1998, the Detmold's Literature Group, coordinated by Brigitte Labs-Ehlert (who later wrote the preface to Peter Zumthor's book *Atmospheres*), invited several writers and poets, such as Peter Waterhouse, Michael Hamburger and Yoko Tawada, to write a poem to a place they would select in the rural landscape near Bad Salzuflen, Germany, a landscape



Fig.1. (Courtesy of Peter Zumthor Büro).

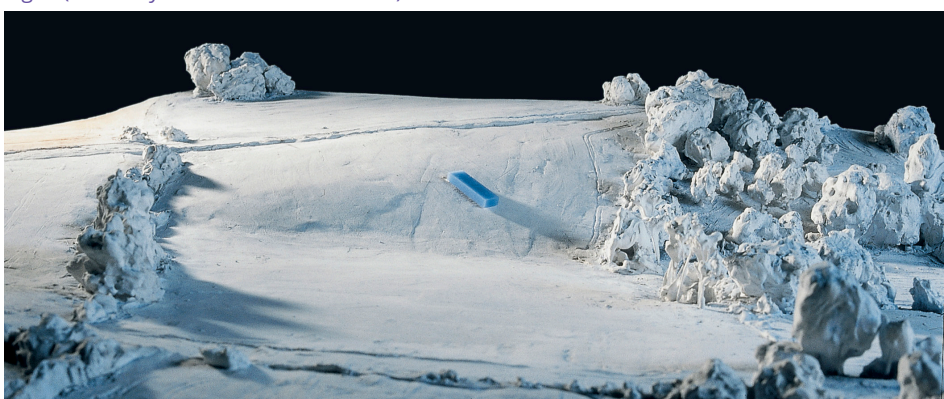


Fig.2. (Courtesy of Peter Zumthor Büro).

characterized by its smooth and wide humid green hills, rolling lines of trees on the horizon and dense forest areas, where glades pay tribute to the sky and the stars. Poetry, as Stevens exemplifies, in the rhythm that belongs to it, in the words and the sounds that echo in emptiness and thought, appropriates, perhaps like no other form of artistic expression, the force and the singularities that compose nature, allowing the one who intones it to penetrate the landscape and feel it in his or her body, which is transformed, in its turn, by the words. The rhythm of the voice, of the air that rises and descends through the vocal chords inside the body, joining the lungs to the brain, turns into a gust of wind, into blue and white and the perfume of flowers, in a moist soil and water. Poetry reacts immediately to the singularities of the landscape, transforming its qualities into sensations. If we are so visceral about a landscape created by poetry, can other forms of art also compose poetic landscapes?

After the selection of the places by the writers and the poets, the literature group invited Peter Zumthor, the Swiss architect, to design a building for each one of those

places, where the poem would be kept and where it could be read: a house for a poem. A particular place in the landscape was doubly interpreted: by the poem and by the work of architecture, and both could be experienced in the place that gave birth to them. The various places, accessible on foot, would form a Poetic Landscape, which in turn would imply an intensive drift between the various places.

Not unexpectedly, the poets with their unique sensibility selected singular moments in the landscape - where three trees align geometrically in the plain (Fig.1), where a large horizontal plane is covered with leaves in the autumn and turns into a hill, where several paths split the dense forest, meeting in a glade - in a work that Zumthor called "seismographic" - as if these places corresponded to points of energy, points of ecstasy of the body of the landscape, which then "traced and brought the form" of the building into being. However, as Zumthor writes: "The text and the building do not touch. The poem is not in the building, the building says nothing about the poem. The poem does not know the building and does not talk about it. But both the text and the

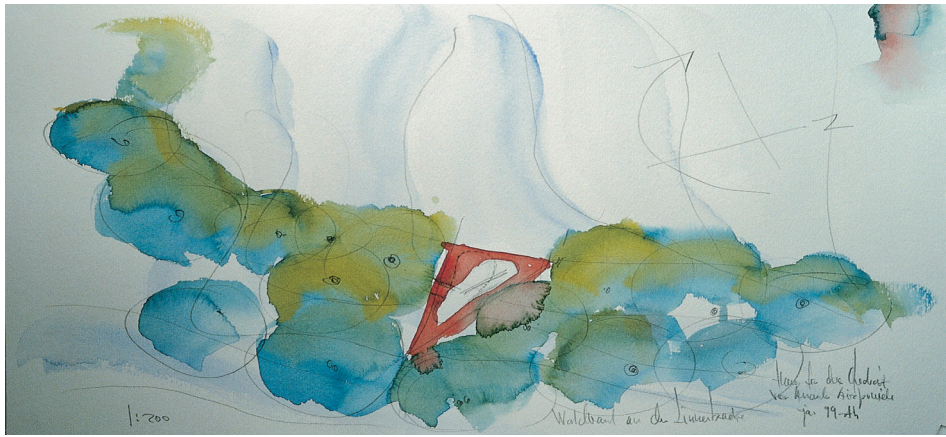


Fig.3. (Courtesy of Peter Zumthor Büro).

building speak of the same place."<sup>3</sup>

The buildings designed by Zumthor for the Poetic Landscape marked the origin of the poem in the landscape, while simultaneously interpreting the place through architecture, through form and materials, which aimed to intensify, like the poem, the experience of the place in the landscape. Looking at the drawings and the models he made, the buildings emerge in moments of tension, on a steep slope, defying the laws of gravity and those of the underground aquifer flows (Fig.2), or on the threshold of a plane where the landscape changes its character and two meadows meet, or between an open meadow and the beginning of the dense forest, in which part of the building hides itself. (Fig.3)

Unfortunately, the local government changed and the Poetic Landscape was not fulfilled. However, it is from that moment that Zumthor changes his own thinking about the relation between landscape and the work of architecture as expressed in the essay "Architecture and Landscape," published in a second edition of *Thinking Architecture*, in which Zumthor, implicitly referring to Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Monk by the Sea*, writes of: "An aesthetic experience: I see a man looking at the horizon line of the ocean with his back to the painter. Like the painter and the man in the painting, I look at the landscape, at the painted horizon, and feel the grandeur and vastness. A certain melancholy comes to the fore, imbued with the sense of a world that is infinitely bigger than I am but offers me sanctuary. In addition to the feeling that nature is close to me

and yet larger than I am, landscape also gives me the feeling of being at home."<sup>4</sup> Curiously, in this excerpt we find echoes of Qiang's commentary on Stevens' poem about the unity existing between man and nature (which is present in both Chinese painting and philosophy), despite nature often presenting itself as the unknown, the immeasurable and the unpredictable, displaying its indomitable forces. Aware that the work of architecture transforms the landscape, Zumthor seeks to understand it from its mysteries and its invisible matter. "First I have to look hard at the landscape, at the woods and trees, the leaves, the grasses, the animated surface of the earth, and then develop a feeling of love for what I see - because we don't hurt what we love. Secondly, I have to take care. That is something I have learned from traditional agriculture, which uses the soil but is, at the same time, sustainable. It takes care of the things that nourish us. Thirdly, I must try to find the right measure, the right quantity, the right size, the right shape for the desired object in its beloved surroundings. The outcome is harmony or possibly even tension. (...) But how do I find the right measure? I venture to claim that we all immediately sense if the relationship between the landscape and the building in which it has been placed is disrupted, if the landscape is not enriched through the architectural intervention but simply threatens to disappear. Besides, this kind of sensing is not a theoretical task; first and foremost, it means having faith in sensual perception."<sup>5</sup>

The sensual perception, which Zumthor refers to, resembles the molecular sensibility defined by Gilles

Deleuze, a type of sensitive perception or attention that allows us to penetrate the landscape, the chemical animism of its components, and to follow its invisible fluxes, determine the singularities that punctuate it and give name to vastness and the infinite, to understand the ruptures and fissures of the earth, the thickness from which life is born, and, most important, to become landscape, as in the poem: to loose one's consciousness while becoming flower, earth, the cosmos.<sup>6</sup> Zumthor reveals to us: "I have to love the earth and the topography. I love the movement of the landscape, the flow and the structure of its forms; I try to imagine how thick the humus is; I see the hard bump in the meadow and sense the big boulder underneath all the other things I don't know very much about, but that give me a wonderful feeling. (...) And when I build something in the landscape, it is important to me to make sure my building materials match the historically grown substance of the landscape. The physical substance of what is built has to resonate with the physical substance of the area. (...) Without a delight in topography and the synthesis of materials, there is no form."<sup>7</sup>

This process is indeed quite similar to the Land Art that arose at the end of the '60s and '70s, who Zumthor praise, in the practice of such artists as Mario Merz, Robert Smithson, Joseph Beuys or James Turrell, to whom the architect turns several times in his work (The Summer Serpentine Pavilion of 2011, for instance, is clearly influenced by James Turrell's *Skyscapes*, and when talking about materials and their infinite combination, Zumthor refers several times to Mario Merz, Joseph Beuys or Meret Oppenheim).

Although not in reference to Zumthor, the projects for the Poetic Landscape remind us of the photographic series *Mimesis* (1972-73), by Barbara and Michael Leisgen, a German couple of artists who noticeably pay a homage to Caspar David Friedrich in their work, his painting *Morgenlicht* being the main starting point to their series. In *Mimesis*, the silhouette of Barbara Leisgen appears in the middle of the photograph, mimicking the landscape's features through the simple gestures and postures of stretching her





Fig.4. Steilneset Memorial, photograph: Susana Ventura, 2014.



Fig.5. Vardø's structure for drying fish. Photograph: Susana Ventura, 2014.

arms in different positions, sometimes to hold the sun around her arms, at other times to create a vessel for the clouds, in other photographs to emphasize the point where two mountains meet at the horizon, or to follow the contours of the undulating countryside. The body becomes a territorial mark within the landscape, intensifying its expressive elements. As they mention: "In a time without words, the coercion to behave mimetically was enormous. Reading clouds, stars, the sun, mountains and dance is reading beyond language."<sup>8</sup> Their several works resembling and mimicking the landscape comes from a reading beyond language that resembles Zumthor's words about the required sensual perception (which he states is not a theoretical task) in order to understand the landscape's expressive components ("The faculties to resemble and to behave similar are faculties of man. The attempt to imitate is always magic, too."<sup>9</sup>) When one looks at the Leisgen's photographs and at Zumthor's drawings and models for the Poetic Landscape projects, the resemblance becomes evident, not because Zumthor might be familiar with the formers' work, but rather because of their related understanding of landscape and nature. Where the body of Barbara Leisgen stands, we may easily imagine a Zumthor building (we may suspect that Zumthor's particular reading of nature's elements might come from his admiration of Wolfgang Goethe as well).

In a different way, we also find resonances between Robert Smithson's work and Zumthor's approach. For the construction of Spiral Jetty - the 460m long and 4.6m wide spiral made of

black basalt that extends out into the Great Salt Lake - in Utah, Smithson had carefully selected the place because of the unusual reddish-pinkish tone that water acquires due to the presence of halophilic micro-organisms that inhabit the lake's very salty water. "On the slopes of Rozel Point I closed my eyes, and the sun burned crimson through the lids. I opened them and the Great Salt Lake was bleeding scarlet streaks,"<sup>10</sup> wrote Smithson. After completion (Smithson built it during a drought), the Spiral Jetty was submerged for decades and when it was rendered visible again, the black basalt rocks exhibited beautiful encrusted crystals of white salt (an effect of the passage of time of which Smithson was possibly aware, for he mentions crystals as part of the material composition of the work and at that time the Spiral Jetty didn't have any crystals in its rocks). Time and nature act as artists transforming the Spiral Jetty's composition through the seasons and fluctuating water levels. It is likely that Smithson was conscious of the future of the Spiral Jetty, as he would be aware of the climate changes and the resulting increased periods of drought that would probably leave the Spiral Jetty waterless and, consequently, losing its expressiveness of a blood lake where a vortex is always changing one's perception (Smithson emphasized the power of the spiral as symbol); sometimes it seems to dissolve the surrounding landscape into a vanishing point. Although the particular environment might retain the necessary properties to support the living bacteria responsible for the colour of the water for a few years after the drought,

it will eventually disappear and turn the landscape into a white, almost icy desolate land. This awareness shows Smithson's interest in entropy as the spiral's change across time, from past to future, will crystallize the very process from order to chaos (Smithson had also investigated the place's past and the marks that time leave imprinted in the landscape).

However differently, Zumthor's Steilneset Memorial in Vardø (Fig.4) may provide important pointers to the future use of resources and promote sustainable use of the ecosystems and endogenous processes as a building that stands in a landscape with unique natural characteristics and extreme weather conditions. For it is clear that Zumthor proceeds in a similar way to Smithson and other Land Art artists with several excursions to the site, walking, collecting and documenting the landscape's expressive singularities (which includes the passage of time and the chaos that nature embodies in itself) that become metamorphosed into the work's composition in order to compose certain spatial sensations. Just as the poem composes, through words, the sensations of a landscape (it's only through the sensation, that one becomes), so the work of architecture also composes sensations, although each artistic form proceeds differently - as we have noticed for the Poetic Landscape project following Zumthor's thought. A spatial sensation is created through the combination of matters of expression that act beyond the functional order, as for instance, when a certain material is combined with other elements in an inventive way,



defying its very physical properties (or augmenting, intensifying these in a way that the material reaches its very limit) that it donates to the space a quality that is extrinsic to the combined elements. We see this in several of Zumthor's works. In the Bruder Klaus Kapelle, for example, where his reflections made after the Poetic Landscape project is also evident; in order to compose the desired atmosphere as the black colour from a fire of the bamboo structure wasn't dark enough, Zumthor decides to make a second fire inside it. This action is only justified by the composition of the sensation when an intensity of black induces in our body a stillness that makes us remain in silence. Our body starts to slow down, our consciousness of the exterior starts to vanish and, as the old man, seated inside the Kapelle we are one with the space, the light and the ground of informal rust patterns that water creates upon the lead floor (that seed of chaos and unpredictability that is left to nature and time to create). Sensations have a direct action and impact on our nervous system, ordering our bodies to mould themselves to space as we are invaded by the power and effects of sensations that we feel by the differences in intensity.

My understanding of the Steilneset Memorial started with an expedition,<sup>11</sup> repeating the method of reading and understanding the landscape, developing a sensual perception of the site, a relation between my body - which transforms itself into something like a resonance box in a landscape - the landscape and the work of architecture. Vardø is an island located above the Arctic circle in Norway, where the land meets its end and we feel earth's curvature and nature's power so strongly. During the summer, the day is endless while during the winter the sky is of the darkest blue, as a constant night, only punctuated by the lights on the streets and in the houses. Every house has a light suspended in the frame of the window (a gesture Zumthor will repeat inside the Memorial). The island's terrain is a continuous mantle of rock, grass, flowers, with the buildings standing in between. There are almost no fences and the houses have a direct relation with this geological stratum. Some of the buildings even have informal green

roofs. The community is mainly occupied in fishing and related industries, and while walking around the island to enjoy its extraordinary nature (in the way of Nordic people), we may still find the old structures used to dry fish (Fig.5), similar to the wood structure of the Steilneset Memorial. The Memorial is placed above the terrain with the natural untouched landscape flowing underneath, its little flowers, rocks and stones, empty sea urchin shell houses, and it recapitulates this movement of walking through the landscape (Fig.6): it is a sheltered passage or a tunnel, a dark one, in the middle of the northern icy landscape. But above all, the memorial is a territory in the Deleuzian sense, where all the

components and singularities of the landscape are metamorphosed into matters of expression in order to compose specific sensations: one of silence and another one of contemplation (however, we will focus here upon the composition of silence).

In the composition of the sensation, there are always thresholds of intensity - when a sensation reaches a limit and changes its nature (for instance: the perfect balance or its immediate fall) - and, in the present example, they coincide with the ones of the building itself, of the entrance and the exit, as a long walk through the Northern landscape already taken place (we are totally immersed in



Fig.6. Steilneset Memorial, photograph: Susana Ventura, 2014.

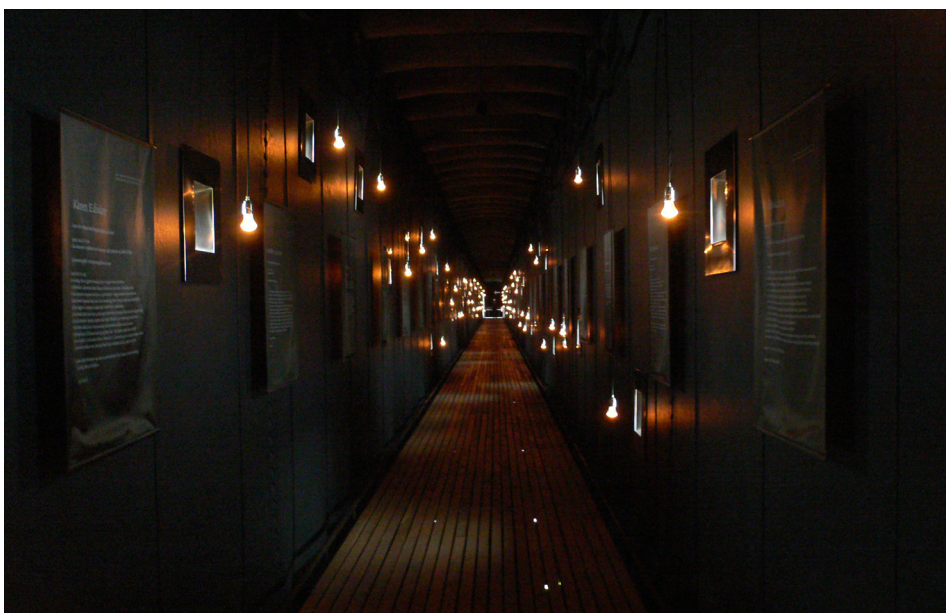


Fig.7. Steilneset Memorial, photograph: Susana Ventura, 2014.

the landscape). Albeit being apparently symmetric, from whatever side we reach it, the sensation changes by the very act of crossing the space of the structure. The entrance, independently of the side, is marked by the heavy door and once we enter the dark corridor, we know that we can't go back. (Clearly understanding the door as a threshold, Zumthor always pays great attention to the doors and all their details, from how our hand grasps the handle, to the movement that the door describes when we push it or close it, to feeling its weight or to its aesthetic expression, the texture of the materials mixed with the time of use and the time of nature). (Fig.7)

Once inside the Memorial (Fig.8), the atmosphere is quieter, but it is also of concentration, of pure saturation prompted mainly by the black canvas, (an artifice that Zumthor would create again in the Summer Serpentine Pavilion, and some former projects where we may identify with the double wall or corridor that envelops space to prepare the body before inhabiting). The silence, however, only becomes expressive because Zumthor kept the presence of nature's elements inside the tunnel: we hear and feel the wind, the Arctic's icy cold, the cries of the seagulls and the birds flying in circles, the waves crashing against the rocks. The tunnel is crossed by nature, by all its elements. However, it's a silent landscape, as if in John Cage's 4'33" all the subtle differences of sound in the interior increase the attentive listening of our bodies, because the space forms an envelope for the body, at the same time making the body concentrate on all the subtle sounds coming from the exterior, in their intensive bodily presence. This dichotomy between exterior and interior space - and we should notice that many of the openings are unreachable to our eyes, so the presence of the exterior elements happens mainly through hearing - is thus extremely important in the composition of silence as a spatial sensation (This is similar to the dissociation between seeing and hearing that Deleuze recognizes in the films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub). Moreover, we murmur the names of the presumed witches who were burnt, even if we don't know how to read them as they belong to a foreign language.

However, this murmur creates a rhythm of its own which resembles a prayer. And this rhythm pairs with another one, of our steps through the space, increasing the silence (as in music, it's the silence between notes and tones that gives music its expressiveness). The components of the surrounding landscape (and especially those, like the reddish-pinkish water of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, that are singularities of an extreme landscape) are transformed into matters of expression in the work of architecture.

The texts and the work of Zumthor, as well as his closeness to the Land Art artists, allow us to deepen our understanding of the relation that Deleuze & Guattari establish between territory, matters of expression and the composition of sensations. Usually they move from the empirical experience (in this case Zumthor's built and written work) to the composition of the philosophical concept (in their view that philosophy is an inventive and creative labour whose principal task is to create concepts). One of their favourite examples to explain the philosophical concept of territory is the story of the Stagemaker Bowerbird, a bird living in the mountain forests of northeast Queensland in Australia. "The brown Stagemaker (*Scenopoeetes dentirostris*) lays down landmarks each morning by dropping leaves it picks from its tree, and then turning them upside down so the paler underside stands out against the earth: inversion producing a matter of expression. The territory is not primary in relation to the qualitative mark; it is the mark that makes the territory."<sup>12</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari believe that the territorializing factor comes from the becoming-expressive of the components that make up the milieu. In the case of the little bird, the bird performs a *mise-en-scène* involving certain postures of its body, the colours of its feathers, its singing and smell. This performance isn't a matter of function, such as attracting the female or the male, defending the territory from possible enemies, or even competing for the best singing composition, which allow Deleuze (& Guattari) to state that a territory is born only when it is expressive. The two authors will again tell the story of the Brown Stagemaker to reinforce

these ideas: "Perhaps art begins within the animal, at least with the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house (both are correlative, or even one and the same, in what is called a habitat). The territory-house system transforms a number of organic functions - sexuality, procreation, aggression, feeding. But this transformation does not explain the appearance of the territory and the house; rather, it is the other way around: the territory implies the emergence of pure sensory qualities, of "sensibilia" that cease to be merely functional and become expressive features, making possible a transformation of function."<sup>13</sup> The Zumthor Memorial is the Stagemaker's leaf, the gesture that allows it to capture nature in its most intense expressiveness and display it in a different way (nature as ready-made, as Deleuze & Guattari would point out). It's the song of the bird, a musical composition of nature's occasional sounds of despair. It's a performance when we cross the tunnel, perpetuating a continuous movement through the landscape that binds the island together. If we close our eyes inside the Memorial, as Smithson did when he arrived at Rozel Point, then when we open them, we would see the end of the earth.

When asked to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures at Harvard about the future of literature in the upcoming millennium, Italo Calvino came up with six values or literary qualities entitling the collection "Six Memos for the Next Millennium": lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency. In each of the lectures (except the last one as he died before finishing the manuscript and delivering the lecture), he depicted each quality through several literary examples from different authors and epochs. In the end, through architecture and the depiction of how specific architectural sensations are composed such as to transform the landscape's components into matters of expression of those same sensations, we are able to contribute to the philosophical, architectural and artistic concept of Poetic Landscape, addressing the values and qualities for the next millennium: to poetically inhabit the world (a form of resistance).



## Notes

1. Zhaoming Qian, Chinese Landscape Painting in Stevens' "Six Significant Landscapes." *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 21.2 (Fall 1997), p. 124.
2. Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 125.
3. Peter Zumthor, lecture presented at the 9th Literature Meeting, Schwalenberg, 21 January 2001.
4. Peter Zumthor, "Architecture and Landscape," *Thinking Architecture*, upcoming re-edition.
5. Idem, *Ibidem*.
6. The process of becoming (*devenir*, in French) as defined by Gilles Deleuze is an a-parallel evolution between two ideas, an encounter between two heterogeneous entities that form a bloc irreducible to either of the terms. As he explains to Claire Parnet, in *Dialogues*: "Les devenirs ne sont pas des phénomènes d'imitation, ni d'assimilation, mais de double capture, d'évolution non parallèle, de noces entre deux règnes. (...) La guêpe et l'orchidée donnent l'exemple. L'orchidée a l'air de former une image de guêpe, mais en fait il y a un devenir-guêpe de l'orchidée, un devenir orchidée de la guêpe, une double capture puisque "ce que" chacun devient ne change pas moins que "celui qui" devient. La guêpe devient partie de l'appareil de reproduction de l'orchidée, en même temps que l'orchidée vient organe sexuel pour la guêpe. Un seul et même devenir, un seul bloc de devenir, ou comme dit Rémy Chauvin, une "évolution a-parallèle de deux êtres qui n'ont absolument rien à voir l'un avec l'autre." Il y a des devenirs-animaux de l'homme qui ne consistent pas à faire le chien ou le chat, puisque l'animal et l'homme ne s'y rencontrent que sur parcours d'une commune déterritorialisation, mais dissymétrique. C'est comme les oiseaux de Mozart: il y a un devenir-oiseau, les deux formant un seul devenir, un seul bloc, une évolution a-parallèle, pas du tout un échange (...)," Gilles Deleuze in Gilles Deleuze, Claire Parnet; *Dialogues*. Paris:

Flammarion, 1996, pp. 8-9.

7. Peter Zumthor, "Architecture and Landscape," *Thinking Architecture*, upcoming reedition.
8. Barbara und Michael Leisgen: *Mimesis*, Catalog, Neue Galerie - Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen, 1974.
9. Idem, *Ibidem*.
10. Robert Smithson in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: the collected writings* Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1996, p. 148.
11. The first expedition to Vardø took place at the end of summer of 2014, after being awarded with the Fernando Távora's Award to realise a journey through several works of architecture.
12. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. London, New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 348.
13. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 183.

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## Biography

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