

## EPHEMERAL LANDSCAPES: MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

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### 1 **ABSTRACT**

*Under normal circumstances, observation of our surroundings is often lost in the hustle and bustle of work and play, commuting and getting to the gym. Spring of 2020 was far from normal, however; suddenly time slowed, with one day blending into the next, and many of us found ourselves with more time to look around and notice the ephemeral of the surrounding landscape. This heightened observation falls within the broader philosophical theory of phenomenology – the study of how different people experience or think about things in different ways. How individual people experience the world around them can be specifically dictated by artists and designers. Two artists, Christo (with Jeanne-Claude) and Richard Long, and one landscape architect, Georges Descombes, use wrapping, walking and recovering, respectively, to highlight a site's systems and reveal the its ephemeral nature; thereby contributing to phenomenology at a more specific level. Through detailed project analysis and exploration of relevant landscape theory, this paper will reveal the strategies and means these artists have applied to the realization of their art. These three artists help to draw attention to elements in the landscape that might otherwise go unnoticed. Wrapping an object is one technique to make the often-invisible visible. A simple walk recorded by listing sounds experienced along the way brings the invisible into sight. What we take for granted and walk by without seeing, again and again, when wrapped or organized or recovered, becomes a visual void that makes us take notice and question its meaning.*

### 1.1 **Keywords:**

Observation, ephemeral, landscape, transience, invisible

## 2 INTRODUCTION

Under normal circumstances, observation of our surroundings is often lost in the hustle and bustle of work and play, commuting and getting to the gym. The moon goes through its stages without notice, spring bulbs pop up, birds build nests, trees leaf out. Spring of 2020 was far from normal, however; suddenly time slowed, with one day blending into the next, and many of found ourselves with more time to look around and notice the ephemeral qualities of the landscape that surrounds us. Two artists, Christo (and his wife Jeanne-Claude) and Richard Long, and one landscape architect, Georges Descombes, use wrapping, walking and recovering, respectively, to highlight a site's layers (physical and natural) and reveal the ephemeral nature of its setting. Through detailed project analysis and exploration of relevant landscape theory, this paper will reveal the strategies and means these artists have applied to the realization of their art.

This ephemerality of the landscape is a characteristic that requires the notice of the viewer in order to wield its true power. In *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan notes: "A scene may be of a place but the scene itself is not a place. It lacks stability: it is in the nature of a scene to shift with every change of perspective...." (Tuan (1977): 236) In this way, the landscape assumes the role of background stage set to our daily performances and it is the constant flux of this stage set that lends richness and meaning to our everyday lives.

Landscape artists have been harnessing this ephemeral quality of the landscape for decades. This transience is what lends seasonality and timeliness to our environment. As Anne Spirn notes, Landscape symphonies evolve continually in time... responding to process and to human purpose, and, in landscape symphonies, all dwellers are composers and players." (Spirn (1998): 22) These three artists: Christo, Long, and Descombes, help to draw attention to these symphonies in the landscape that might otherwise go unnoticed. What we take for granted and walk by without seeing, again and again, when wrapped or organized or recovered, becomes a visual void that makes us take notice and question its meaning.

### 2.1 The Artists

The selection of Christo, Richard Long and Georges Descombes is significant because of their minimal approach to their work and the effort that each artist takes to let their projects "disappear" over time. Through the seemingly simple acts of wrapping, walking and recovering, these three artists allow the landscape to become the central player in their work and to dictate the end result, whether aesthetic or functional. Wrapping an object is one technique to make the often-invisible visible. This seemingly simple act of covering an object draws one's attention to its absence, and therefore its presence, in the landscape. Michael Kimmelman wrote about Christo for the New York Times,

"With his interest in intangibles and process, Christo was like many other conceptual artists of the '60s and '70s. That his approach involved wrapping things in order to reveal them was itself a familiar conceptualist concept. What set him apart was the fact that his work attracted such large masses of people...and generated no small measure of happiness and awe." (Kimmelman, 2020)

Christo and Jeanne-Claude wished to be credited as equal collaborators on all of their projects, and they worked in a style of abstraction whose meanings remained open-ended and up for debate. Instead of creating art projects that were meant to last for ages, typical of the Marxist regime of his homeland, their works are temporary, meant to last a certain amount of time – to be taken down either by the same hands that put them up, or earlier by forces of nature that cannot be controlled by the artist. And thus the impact on viewers is strong but ephemeral, leaving a fleeting imprint on the eyes, but an indelible impact on ones memory. When asked about his process that included paperwork, the workers, the politics, the negotiations, the construction difficulties, the dealings with hundreds of people, Christo added that his and Jeanne-Claude's projects "exist in their time, impossible to repeat. That is their power, because they cannot be bought, they cannot be possessed." (Kimmelman, 2020)

One of Christo's most well-loved and revered projects was the wrapping of the Pont Neuf in Paris. (Figure 1) The project, which was completed in 1985 after being stalled for years due to French bureaucracy, covered an integral part of the city's historic infrastructure in a saffron nylon fabric. Parisians cross this bridge that spans the Seine at the western tip of the île de la Cité by foot and by car. A variety of

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boats float under it, including Bateaux Mouches (excursion boats), barges, and fishing boats. And cars can pass under it on the north side of the river only. I would argue, however, that very few people ever gave much thought to the bridge beyond being a way to get from the Rive Droit to the Rive Gauche on their daily commute until it was wrapped in its yellow glory. William Grimes described the wrapping in Christo's obituary in the New York Times, noting "The honey-colored fabric... blended harmoniously with Paris's urban palette, and the bridge's artful draping was deemed worthy of a couture house." (Grimes, 2020)



**Figure 1.** (<https://emerging-europe.com/after-hours/remembering-christo-the-artist-who-dared-to-dream/> January 6, 2021)

After the installation, John Russell wrote in the New York Times of the of the public's love affair with the wrapped bridge. "If it was fundamentally vacuous, nobody complained. It was something to look at, something to walk on and something to think about." (Russell, 1985) This urban element, an integral part of the landscape of the city of Paris, was brought into the public consciousness and given a new facade. People stopped and looked and noticed, and talked, and considered a part of their city that had before been a mere means of convenience. Russell went further describing,

"What could not have been foreseen was the sheer elegance, the perfection of French craftsmanship that had gone into the wrapping.... The color is amazing, and so is the texture. As color, it cannot be defined. It is by turns blond, bronze, gold, bamboo.... It changes hour by hour, minute by minute, from dawn till dusk. Furthermore, it is never obtrusive. Not only are the hallowed original forms of the ancient bridge protected and respected, but here and there they make themselves felt in a teasing, delicately erotic way that is truly Parisian." (Russell, 1985)

By wrapping the Pont Neuf in this blond, gold covering, Christo reintroduced his audience to the underlying beauty of the bridge, and as an extension, the beauty of its context. Its sinuous structure and its prominent position within the city were reflected in the watery mirror of the Seine flowing below and for a short time the Pont Neuf made people slow down and take time to reacquaint themselves with their city. The Philosopher John Dewey wrote that "The closer man is brought to the physical world, the clearer it becomes that his impulses and ideas are enacted by nature within him. ...The sense of relation between nature and man in some form has always been the actuating spirit of art." (Dewey (1929): 338) Christo's

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act of wrapping things, whether buildings, objects, landscapes, brings man closer to the physical world by startling him out of a state of complacency and providing a vehicle through which to come a little closer to his natural surroundings. Even if for just a moment in time.

In a similar fashion the British artist, Richard Long, brings the invisible into sight through the art of his walks. Entering the public consciousness in 1972 with his ground-breaking work, *A Line Made from Walking*, (Figure 2) a seemingly simple black and white photograph of a straight line etched into the ground, Long draws his mark on the surface of the earth.



**Figure 2.** (*A Line Made from Walking*, [www.richardlong.org](http://www.richardlong.org)  
January 6, 2021)

What does this single line reveal to the viewer? A number of modest elements of the landscape that could easily go unnoticed: the evenly flat terrain, the layers making up the surface of the ground (packed soil uncovered by his steps, the low grass with spring ephemerals that have been effectively erased by his steps), the dark, dense boundary of the field where the line seems to end. This directness of the line underscores the perspectival space of the field as it recedes into the distance. Recognizing the temporary nature of these drawings, whether in the form of a line, circle, or collection of objects found along his route, Long records his walk through the media of photography and written text. Long is interested in exploring concepts of time, space, and surface, and the evolving nature of these concepts. In fact, he hints at the importance of these ideas of ephemerality on his own homepage with the following text-work:

“In the nature of things:  
Art about mobility, lightness and freedom.  
Simple creative acts of walking and marking  
about place, locality, time, distance and measurement.  
Works using raw materials and my human scale  
in the reality of landscapes.” ([www.richardlong.org](http://www.richardlong.org))

With this simple statement, Long relinquishes any lengthy discussion of his method; instead, these lines serve as a condensed list of artistic principles centered around his measured movements through time in the landscape. (Dapena-Tretter, p.106)

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Born in Bristol, England, Long was raised in the tradition of long walks through the British countryside. These walks, these “measured movements,” allow Long to bring to light the subtleties of the landscape and to reveal the details found upon and within it. Antonia Dapena-Tretter writes in her article, “Richard Long’s Passage as Line: Measuring Toward the Horizon”,

The performance of the walk, a ritual wandering, is only later documented through a photograph, marked map, or text work. Though the art object is created as a permanent remembrance of the walk, the traces are always ephemeral, sometimes drawn in the snow, or sometimes signified by upturned stones, and will disappear through the passing of time and exposure to the elements.” (Dapena-Tretter, p.103)

The physical act of walking, of foot meeting ground, is a crucial element of Long’s art; it is through the touching of sole to surface of the land that the story is told. James Corner describes the importance of this physical touch with the land: “Landscape is best understood not as scenery, object or thing, as if external to the human body, but more as a deeply visceral milieu within which the body is fully and completely immersed.” (Mind Landscapes (2020): 62) As with Christo’s wrappings, Long’s walks are intended as temporary installations that are meant to reveal elements of the site or the landscape that might otherwise go unnoticed. Richard Long’s art takes a number of forms, from simple straight walks through dust, leaves, snow, to circles cleared in the sand (negative void in the field) and circles made from found objects (positive two-dimensional object in the field); from lists of sounds heard along a route to recordings of how much time he spends with his own shadow on a walk. All of these are subject to disappearing with time, in essence fleeting reflections of the artistic performance.

One work of Long’s that I find particularly revealing and successful in this act of making the invisible visible is “Five Stones, Iceland, 1974” in which Long rolled five stones down a hill and documented their paths with a photograph. (Figure 3) Each stone makes its own individual mark on the terrain and the resulting five lines reveal the sloping topography of the land and all of the objects the stones encountered along the way that diverted and chartered their course. In a different photograph, with no stones, the landscape would appear flat and the viewer would have no sense of the undulating ground form. Again, words by James Corner seem to describe the resulting revelation aptly: “Hence, we see both the topology of topography and place (topos) intersecting with the measured topology of spatial geometry and structural relationship.” (Mind Landscapes (2020): 63)

In addition to photographs, Long often uses maps and written text to document his walks. These methods reveal the measured and spatial qualities of his works in a more suggestive way – requiring additional investment from his audience in the way of imagination and trust. No longer handed to us as two-dimensional pictures that can be easily analyzed, these works rely on words and topographic maps to tell the story of his walk. This added effort asked of the individual viewer to uncover meaning in the walk and reveal the nature of his experience lends the works a more personal vibe. One of these text works, *Spring Walk*, documenting a walk taken through Avon in 1991, is essentially a list of twelve objects or experiences Long encountered along his route. (Figure 4) The encounters are listed in chronological order and each experience is accompanied by the mileage marker. This blend of simple descriptive (Ladybirds, A Butterfly, etc.) and geographic / spatial measurement (29 Miles, 85 Miles, etc.) gives the list both visual and temporal rhythm. While the list is specific and set, every reader will imagine the walk in a slightly different way, bringing their own visual to the number of squirrels and color of daffodils Long chanced upon along his way.



**Figure 3.** (*Five Stones, Iceland, 1974* [www.richardlong.org](http://www.richardlong.org) January 6, 2021)

### SPRING WALK

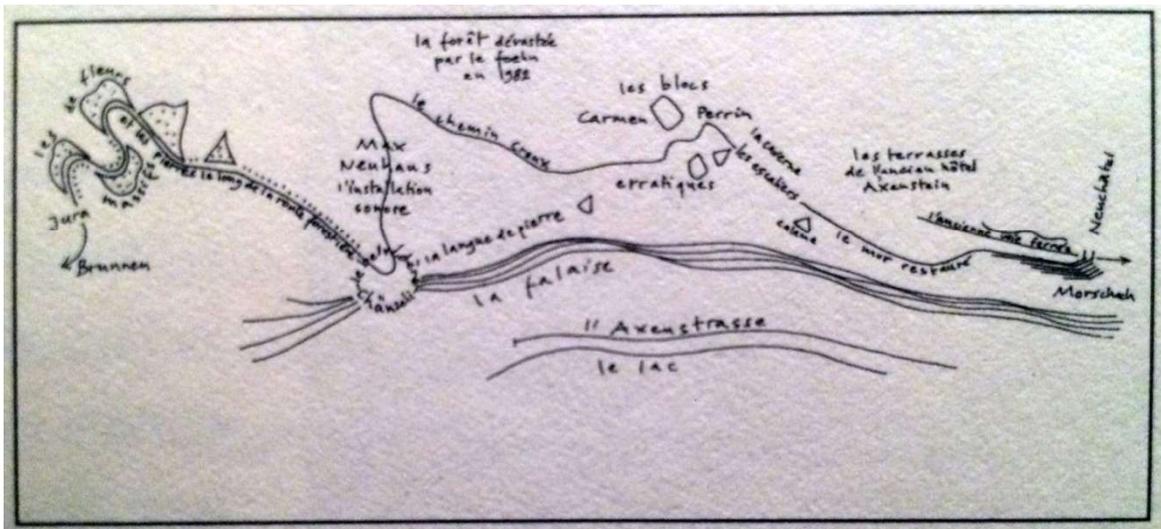
PRIMROSES AT 3 MILES  
FROGSPAWN AT 18 MILES  
A CROW NEST-BUILDING AT 29 MILES  
A FARMER SOWING AT 34 MILES  
LADYBIRDS AT 38 MILES  
SQUIRRELS AT 57 MILES  
LAMBS AT 62 MILES  
STICKY BUDS AT 67 MILES  
A TREE PLANTED AT 70 MILES  
A BUTTERFLY AT 85 MILES  
BLOSSOM AT 104 MILES  
DAFFODILS AT 112 MILES

AVON ENGLAND 1991

**Figure 4.** (*Spring Walk, www.richardlong.org* January 7, 2020)

While the creative works described above are attributed to artists, a third, Georges Descombes, is a landscape architect whose designs on the land seek to recover a site's natural systems and the depth of its past. This interest in recovering the site's past is another way of revealing elements of a site that might otherwise go unnoticed. Descombes is a renowned Swiss landscape architect who approaches each project by studying the existing conditions of the site and considering how with minimal interventions those conditions can be highlighted and celebrated. (<https://www.oroeditions.com/product/doing-almost-nothing/>) One project that illustrates this attention to a site's past and how it can inform the future is a section of The Swiss Way.

The Swiss Way is a conception composed of sections of a path that link up to form a continuous pathway around Lake Uri. Approximately 35 kilometers long, the Way was conceived to commemorate the 700<sup>th</sup> year of the Confederation of Switzerland in 1991. The project was intended as the ecological counterpoint to the more grandiose projects celebrating the same anniversary. Each of Switzerland's twenty-six cantons was given a section of the path, and Georges Descombes was invited by the canton of Geneva to design a 2 kilometer section of the pathway. (Figure 5) Descombes's work tends to the extremely minimal, to the point that some criticize him for doing too little, but he views his approach differently. "I hope that my work acts as a device for the revealing of forces that are (or have become) imperceptible... creating a source of different attention, a different vision, a different emotion." (Recovering Landscape (1999): 79)



**Figure 5.** (Sketch Plan of the Swiss Way, Georges Descombes, [drawing], pencil on paper. From Recovering Landscape (pg. 80), by James Corner et al., 1999, New York: Princeton Architectural Press)

A collaborative effort with artists Richard Long, Carmen Perrin, and Max Neuhaus, Descombes sought inspiration from the site for the design of the path. As he writes in "Shifting Sites," an essay describing the creation of The Swiss Way, "We saw the path as a way of researching the landscape, of experimenting with alternately big and little things with the often overlooked and neglected – blades of grass, flowers, stones, tree roots, small streams, and so on." (Recovering Landscape (1999): 81) Recognizing that the landscape is a palimpsest, a multilayered surface of stories and occurrences, the design team sought to reveal this accumulation and to build on the history of the site. Effectively making the previously invisible on the site more apparent through their intervention. Descombes walked the section of the path over and over just looking.

He "tried to look out for things that we normally do not see, such as flowers and mice, and anything else that moves around covertly with the wish to remain undisturbed. At the same time, I wanted to leave a mark of our own time, to overlay an unequivocal trace of our activity." (Recovering Landscape (1999): 82)

This strong belief in the importance of connecting the past, present, and future layers of a site gave the team a strategy – the selective subtraction of anything that did not contribute to the natural essence of

the landscape. James Corner describes this connection between placemaking and temporality in his words: “the visceral sense of nature in landscape architecture and placemaking offers a profound connection to elemental natural phenomena and to the passage of time.” (Mind Landscapes (2020): 62)

This changing of the game, subtracting from the site rather than adding to as is the typical architectural process, gives The Swiss Way its elemental character. Descombes, Long, Perrin and Neuhaus worked to make the passing of time visible on the site and at the same time to recognize its future potential. Descombes writes,

“My attitude toward intervening in the landscape circles around paying attention to that which one would like to be present where no one expects it any more. Thus, for me, to recover something – a site, a place, a history, or an idea – entails a shift in expectation and point of view.” (Recovering Landscape (1999): 79)

They took away all things that detracted from the sense of the place, and only added elements that brought clarity to the site and drew “attention to the magic of the everyday.” (Recovering Landscape (1999): 83) One such addition, the belvedere (or Chanzeli), perches on a cliff looking out over the lake and, amplifying what already existed, highlights its features.

This recovered landscape along the Geneva section of The Swiss Way assumes a new look for the future based on the memory of its terrain. “To design for sites with this principle in mind is to perform an action that allows for reflection on totally ordinary matters.... Perhaps the matters that are not noticed are those that are essential.” (Recovering Landscape (1999): 85) By bringing to light these seemingly ordinary and inconsequential elements of the site, the design team has recovered the site’s temporal qualities and has brought the previously hidden and invisible to the surface for all to experience.

### **3 CONCLUSIONS**

It cannot be denied that the landscape is a continually evolving stage, a collection of systems both natural and manmade that are in a constant state of flux. But it is not only the terrain that changes over time, it is also the way that people perceive it. Life gets busy, our days become a blend of work, play, errands, and obligations. So much so that many can lose sight of the simple beauty of their surroundings, the changes in season, the subtleties of the natural world – even if the setting is more urban than rural. These three artists: Christo, Richard Long, and Georges Descombes, each employ strategies to slow the eye, to enhance perception, and to make the previously invisible more visible to the passerby. Christo’s wrapping of objects and draping of valleys and hillsides brought new (and colorful) life to settings both manmade and natural. By covering buildings, bridges, monuments, and voids between landforms, Christo created new shimmering objects that made people stop and take a new look at something they had seen many times before but never really understood. Similarly, Richard Long’s walks reveal the particularities of the landscape he is within and record the subtle nuances that make the site so unique. Etching a line through the sand, drawing a line with found stones by standing them on end, clearing a circle in the snow, recording his walk with words and sounds, all of these methods are personal documentation of a singular experience in the landscape. By sharing these recordings with his audience, Long makes this experience available to others and provides a new lens through which to view the ephemerality of the landscape. Although a landscape architect, Georges Descombes approaches his work through a similar sensitivity to the site as Christo and Long. While Christo wrapped, and Long walks, Descombes recovers the traces on a site that have gone unnoticed, bringing back to the surface the complex stories of the place and the forces that have become imperceptible. Studying the processes that continually reshape the land: weather, seasons, light, growth, erosion, Descombes harnesses these traces of the past as he designs for the future, emphasizing the inherent qualities of the landscape and revealing ones that had been hidden for too long.

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[www.richardlong.org](http://www.richardlong.org)