Aspects of Landscape Politics in *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE: a story about a family and some people changing*, by Robert Wilson and the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds[1]

By Matthew Bent

Abstract

Theatre director Robert Wilson spent much of the summer of 1972 incarcerated in a Greek jail, sketching mountains. These would form the basis of a performance – the vast *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE* – which took over the land surrounding Shiraz, Iran, for seven days, creating a site of sprawling performance activity on the Haft Tan Mountains. Navigating the inherent difficulties of studying a performance of such scale, my intention in this paper is to acknowledge the aesthetic politics beneath the surface of *KA MOUNTAIN*. Bringing performance theory of the avant-garde into contact with the work of cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove and writing on Iranian land reform, I hope to offer a productive evaluation of the politics of *KA MOUNTAIN*'s landscape aesthetics.

Introduction

This paper will consider one of the most distinctive and influential places of avant-garde performance in the late twentieth century: the city of Shiraz in south-west Iran, which between 1967 and 1977 hosted the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts. Responding to the festival, I will build upon the writing of contemporary theorists of radical (inter)cultural production, considering how their ideas can be brought to bear on a study of performance and place. I will be concentrating on a single work which has a particular piquancy in this historical moment as the project of a contemporary vanguard artist making performance on the land. *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE: a story about a family and some people changing* is famously a work of sprawling size. The performance lasted 168 hours from midnight 2 September until midnight 8 September 1972, spread across the Haft Tan Mountains on the outskirts of Shiraz and in to the city itself. Each day of *KA MOUNTAIN* was bookended by pieces in the morning and evening created for a seated audience in front of a stage which had been erected at the base of the mountains, but the majority of the performance consisted of pieces spread out across a vast area, with activities ranging from solo dances, to silent group 'scenes', to large-scale crowd performances.[2] While there is much to look at in this ambitious and problematic work, my focus for this paper will be on some of the ways in which Wilson responded to the natural environment in Shiraz and what these can show us about the relationship between performance processes, the commission and creation of certain forms of avant-garde art and the politics of land ownership at this moment in time. I will bring the theories of performance scholar James Harding and cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove into contact with the writing of Mohammad Gholi Majd on land reform to set in motion what I hope will be a productive consideration of the political resonance of Wilson's performance.

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[1] This paper builds on a project from my time at Queen Mary, University of London, working under the supervision of Professor Nicholas Ridout. As such, it is only right that I acknowledge his important contribution to this work at the outset.

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[2] Notably, utilising a wholly different 'vanguard' force: the Shah's army. Wilson claims to have got the soldiers chanting 'the dying dinosaurs soar' over and over on the mountainside. (Daftari and Diba 93-95). What with the ubiquitous presence of secret police at Shiraz performances also, this was quite the meeting ground of vanguard forces.

Due to the vast spread of *KA MOUNTAIN* over time and space, ensuring that no spectator or performer present would have been able to experience the whole of the piece, the little documentary material and writing on the performance is quite fragmented and sketchy. This presents an issue to any researcher seeking to understand what exactly took place for most of those 168 hours. Arguably, any attempt to understand historical performance events becomes an increasingly difficult task as time takes us away from the experience of *being there* – in that place, at that time, watching the live event. However, I am in agreement with Amelia Jones that while it is important to acknowledge "the specificity of knowledges gained from participating in a live performance situation … this specificity should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event" (12). I am also not convinced that knowing exactly *what happened when* during the performance necessarily contributes to a greater understanding. Historical distance provides perspective to see the performance in relation to simultaneously occurring, related events. This position is the basis of my analysis here.

Unavoidable within the little documentation which does exist of *KA MOUNTAIN* is the lack of Iranian voices. While there are some widely-available first-hand accounts of those who were there, the most comprehensive English-language source (found in Laurence Shyer's book *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*) provides testimonies from members of the Byrd School only and not from the many Iranian performers who contributed to the work. Addressing this in my own research, while I may receive backing from Jones on the legitimacy of analysing a performance like *KA MOUNTAIN* from such a historical distance, the lack of sources from Iran provides a methodological issue for this project. Such sources – if they do exist – are for the time being not included.

This said, for the purpose of this paper I would like to consider the relative lack of first-hand sources on the performance as something of an opportunity. The following analysis of the politics of landscape aesthetics in Wilson's practice and consideration of how resonant Wilson's work is with the contemporary issue of land ownership in 1970s Iran demonstrates a critical attention to the historical circumstances and material conditions of the performance event. After reviewing Harding's argument on the centrality of intercultural exchange in avant-garde artistic production, I hope to illustrate how a performance event such as this, which takes place outside of the theatre on the land and in the streets, becomes not only a series of performance/performative interactions between individuals of different cultures (which, in Harding's terms, defines the avant-garde moment), but a reflection of contemporary geopolitical issues through the political implications of landscape aesthetics. Here, the idea of artistic autonomy – that the work can be considered 'in itself', isolated from historical, socio-economic, (geo)political circumstances – is rejected, in alignment with contemporary studies of radical art which attempt to shine a light on the previously unrecognised politics of such work. My contention that the conditions under which the performance took place are equally important as the (fragmentary) documentary evidence turns a methodological conundrum into a starting point for a re-evaluation of the modes of enquiry in a field of study where a singular event is often considered in isolation for the purpose of critical examination.

Land Reform in Iran

Reading a politics of land ownership in 1970s Iran must include some account of the importance of this issue in the political mainstream at the time. Land reform, a central tenet of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's 'White Revolution', where (in theory) land would be bought by the government from owners who held a large amount and re-distributed amongst peasants and sharecroppers who could then own the land they worked on, produce surpluses, enter the market, etc., was widespread in developing economies under

American influence during the 1960s. Mohammad Gholi Majd suggests that from the perspective of the US government, by empowering peasants and sharecroppers through the "gift" of property "a communist revolution or takeover could be avoided" (123). The idea was presumably that by broadening out access to private property ownership a fortunate new class of rural workers would be relieved from their alienation, earn a profit and favour the Shah for his pioneering role in re-distribution. In reality, with the help of some widespread, low-level corruption, the larger landowners were able to retain many of their prime plots and the new holdings for workers were often of poor quality and barely large enough to sustain a family. With the landowning elite holding onto much of their property, then, the pre-existing "small landowners" of Majd's title lost most from the reforms. Quite aside from the (ultimately failed) theory that land reform would involve buying from a few highly endowed landowners and redistributing to the masses, Majd points to the expropriation of the existing rural petty bourgeoisie who had invested whatever meagre savings they had in land (125). For these landowners the results of the reform would be catastrophic, with the authorities offering disproportionately small sums for land and confiscating it if the owner did not 'sell'. Majd considers this small landowning class as a politically vital sub-group which took to the streets in protest after the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1963, which is now recognised as an early signal of the coming revolution (148). Seemingly, the notion of a land redistribution process from rich to poor did not work out in such a way – the Shah's attempt to dampen potential resistance from the rural workers serving to impoverish and activate another section of the population.

This may not seem immediately relevant to the question of performance efficacy, but my contention is that this attempt to change attitudes to property and the market, dulling the influence of the religious leaders, and the establishment of an international festival were all part of a cultural project to re-shape Iranian society and place the European-educated, secular and autocratic Shah at its centre. This is why it is important to acknowledge the contentious nature of land-politics for the discussion of Wilson. While the accounts that Majd gives are a brief example of just the first stage of a much wider process of reform, they serve to display something of the tension surrounding this issue of land ownership in pre-revolution Iran and its association with the troubled and contradictory relations with the United States.

The Avant-Garde and Landscape Aesthetics

In their introduction to the book *Not the Other Avant-Garde*, James Harding and John Rouse utilise the uniquely diverse scope of the "broad spectrum" approach of performance studies to posit a re-theorisation of avant-garde artistic production as a performative phenomenon taking place globally, at meeting points between cultures. Harding's article in the collection builds on the assertion that, due to its subtle "entanglement" with the politics of colonialism at its inception, European avant-garde artistic expression was always already a global phenomenon (18-19). He sees the seeds of European avant-garde art within the moments of intercultural encounter which inspired artistic "primitivism", rather than, as has become "scholarly convention", to see the avant-garde moment as subsequent to these encounters (23) – presumably in the studio of a Picasso or Gauguin. Harding then lays out the conceptual repercussions of this critical refocus. Firstly: a movement from a concept of the "cutting edge"[3] to the pluralised/pluralist "rough edges" of intercultural encounter, which are considered the foundational moments of avant-garde expression. He then uses the linked concept of globally dispersed, simultaneously occurring radical movements as a primer for his discussion of "transnationalism" at the boundaries of intercultural exchange (27) – that troublesome concept, the "contradictory trajectories" of which in different critical accounts make it just as likely to see the term put to use in examining processes of (neo)colonialist hegemony as to counterhegemonic practices (30-31). Perhaps the most likely instance in which to find the term would be in reference to the homogenising influence of 'transnational corporations' – an association which would certainly resonate with many residents of Tehran in the 1960s and 70s during the rapid proliferation of American

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3 "Cutting edge" here both denotes the critical term used to recognise the value of a radical form of cultural expression, and (as in the specific instance cited above) a theoretically heretofore unchallenged notion of gradual European homogenisation – where the "cutting edge" acts as cultural border of influence which expands its reach across the world. (Harding 26)

products in public spaces and in the hands of the capital's secular *nouveau riche* (Axworthy 78-84). Conversely, and through an analysis of Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity as a form of counterhegemonic transnationalism, Harding returns the reader to points of interpersonal contact between cultures – those rough edges from which avant-garde expression springs – which might, with renewed vigour, be explored as sites of exchange, contestation and mutual resistance to the forces of homogenisation. That is, of course, if it is a concern of the artists involved – the intercultural moment remains precarious because it not only has the potential for counterhegemonic cultural invention, but also because it retains the problematic possibility of subtly extending the reach of homogenising/appropriating neo-colonial forces.

I would like to build upon Harding's work, considering the precarious politics of intercultural encounters in avant-garde production in a site (the Shiraz Arts Festival) created to facilitate such meetings, with a discussion of the intercultural politics of Wilson's practice on the land. I am interested in the way in which Wilson re-formed the landscape and what this may have meant in Iran at this time. The work which most informs my thinking on landscape is Denis Cosgrove's *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. In a move to acknowledge the idea of landscape as a human, social phenomenon within the field of geography – "a way of seeing the world" (13) – rather than purely as object of empirical enquiry based upon the model of the natural sciences, Cosgrove draws his reader's attention to “[landscape’s] links to broader historical structures and processes” in order to “locate landscape study within a progressive debate about society and culture” (15). It is “a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature” (Cosgrove 15). I would like to place Wilson’s work within a genealogy of such historical processes of signification, in an intercultural moment which Harding and Majd’s writings help us to understand.

The passage in Cosgrove that is most obviously relevant to my purposes here is his section on the subject of landscape and social formation through an innovation in the history of European painting and the distinction it illuminates between different relationships of land, leisure and work. The technique in question is single-point perspective. Using this device, the artist shapes, orders and invitingly directs the natural world towards the gaze of a viewer (presumably the commissioning patron), standing immediately in front of the painting. The spectator-owner and their peers could gaze into this image of harmony and experience the highly satisfying sensation of propertied ownership. Importantly, they may walk away from and return to the landscape, leisurely, as they please, in a way that the agricultural labourer, bound to the land through necessity, cannot. The landscape aesthetic, as Cosgrove puts it, creates a “control of space in which an illusion of order [can] be sustained” (20). The artist becomes “controlling creator" (25), shaper of the world for the patron.[4]

It is not so much the device of single-point perspective *per se* which is of interest to me here, though for Wilson this would become an oft-used trope. Of greater relevance is the artist's process of organising and ordering the world within a frame, whether that is the framed canvas, the frame of the proscenium arch stage, or otherwise, and the aestheticised appropriation which comes with this. As early as 1969's *The King of Spain*, Wilson was making work for proscenium arch theatres, using the 'window' of this organisation of spectator-performance relations to define a unidirectional view into his stage pictures.[5] Wilson, it is safe to say, generally adheres to the logic of the 'fourth wall' – that the world of the stage, behind the frame, never 'spills out' into the world of the auditorium – though, of course, his pictures are organised and orientated towards that wall for the benefit of the spectators. These spectators, attending most works directed by Wilson during the 1960s and 70s, were free to get up and leave the auditorium – go for a drink, go for a joint, go home – and come back whenever they pleased during the course of the performance. In short, the framing of the work and the conditions of spectatorship are comparable to that of the landscape painting as described by Cosgrove, where the features of the scene are composed in a way most appealing to the onlooker, who may come and go at their leisure. In each instance, the artist imbues the spectator with a sense of ownership over their experience – and thus over the land – through their invitation to look (or not) from the privileged position given to them.[6] Cosgrove sees the cultural distinction between those for whom the landscape is a leisure experience and those for whom it is a site of labour. While across Iran the dispossessed and forgotten of the reform period were becoming more dependent on diminishing returns from their labour on the land, in *KA MOUNTAIN* Wilson created a 24-hour avant-garde leisure experience, where the land was given over to the curious festivalgoer to explore under his guidance.

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[4] John Berger famously makes a similar point in reference to eighteenth-century painter Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* when discussing the relationship between oil painting and property (106-108).

[5] It is also worth remembering Wilson's tendency to designate his stage images as either 'Portrait', 'Landscape' or 'Still Life', as well as the proximity of his vision to the 'landscape' theatre idea of Gertrude Stein. Even within the proscenium arch auditorium, references to the natural world are never far away.

For the 1972 Shiraz Festival, Wilson had initially been invited to present *Deafman Glance* (1970) – the work seen by Shahbanu Pahlavi in Paris the previous year – but he declined due to the lack of a proscenium arch theatre.[7] So, in lieu of a traditional western theatre space with its in-built picture frame, Wilson created his own 'frames' on the mountain at Shiraz through which to compose, shape and order the landscape. By this time Wilson was already using a distinctive framing device usually associated with television or cinema to create the imagery for his theatre. I am referring to Wilson's 'storyboard' process, where he sketches out the images which will form the basis of a performance in the way a filmmaker might sketch out scenes to be shot (Shevtsova 47). During his untimely incarceration for possession of pot in Greece, just weeks before the Byrds were due to meet in Iran to rehearse, Wilson was storyboarding and sketching images for *KA MOUNTAIN* which would be realised on the mountains. It is within the frame of these storyboard images that Wilson organises his stage space – and, in the context of Shiraz, the Iranian landscape. In terms of shaping the landscape to control space and direct the spectator, Wilson explains how he constructed a series of "roadmap[s] for the mountain" (Daftari and Diba 95). These came in many forms: as rows of houses, flamingos, fish, the footsteps of dinosaurs and signposts which created pathways for the spectator to follow. Wilson, with characteristically surreal symbols, reordered the world in his image for the pleasure of the spectator – less an intercultural moment of exchange, more an individual artist mapping out coordinates for marking his project onto the terrain.

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[6] It seems to me to be more appropriate to compare Wilson's work to that of landscape painters, rather than to his contemporaries in the 'land' or 'earth art' movement. Wilson's focus on classical composition and his near-exclusive use of the proscenium arch stage makes the comparison to Renaissance painters seem more pertinent. A particularly opportune example to support this theory came in late 2013/early 2014, when some of Wilson's 'video portraits' were on display amongst the collection of European paintings at the Musée du Louvre, Paris.

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[7] Ironically, the Byrds did end up performing *Deafman* after all. The lack of rehearsal time seemingly resulted in a mass re-rehearsal of old material to fill the first of those 168 hours – *Deafman Glance* was performed in its entirety on the first night of *KA MOUNTAIN*. See: Robert Wilson, 'KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE: a story about a family and some people changing, a 168-Hour Play for the 1972 Festival of Shiraz' (Daftari and Diba 93-95) and see also (Shyer 47).

The shaping and ordering of the space within an artistic frame and the relaxed 'come and go' mode of spectatorship form a clear genealogical link to the proprietary aesthetics of European landscape painting. While the tenets of the vanguard milieu Harding describes are clear to see in Shiraz, the Wilson project reveals an association between land and leisure (via the avant-garde trope of 'blurring art and life') which chimes with recent attempts to change cultural attitudes to land within Iran. The Shah's move to expand and capture a small-capitalist land-owning class, designed to placate and pre-emptively dampen support for a potential democratic uprising, would seek to relieve workers of their heavy labour and turn them in to traders and employers. The Shiraz project, and Wilson's *KA MOUNTAIN*, transformed the city and the land into a site of avant-garde art-life leisure – albeit one underscored by the threat of SAVAK surveillance and censorship. Considering the work within the broader cultural changes being instigated in Iran at the time, the important relationship between aesthetics and land ownership emerges. The neo-colonial influence leveraging land reform aimed at producing stability for the Shah's autocracy by expanding a bourgeois base of comfortable landowners. This formed part of the policy of cultural transformation which also involved the invitation of global vanguard artists to take over the city of Shiraz as a site of artistic experimentation. Wilson's work, with its ancestral links to the aesthetics of private property exercised by landscape painters, emanates a cultural logic of owning, shaping and controlling the land which echoes the intentions (if not the actual results) of the reforms. So while the festival at Shiraz created the possibility for transnational forms of resistance to homogenisation – the interpersonal connections formed at the 'rough edges' of vanguard creation – a critical reflection upon the circumstances surrounding the policy and how these relate to the artistic strategies and spectatorship model of *KA MOUNTAIN*, displays the troublesome nature of the symbolic terrain on which this performance took place.

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