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Picturing landscape : contemporary photography, collective visual memory and the making of place in the Netherlands

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Afterword

gardening Dutch landscape design

In the Netherlands, discussion about the development of landscape is very common. Partly, this is because the country is a delta landscape, largely comprising sand and clay. These materials, by their very nature, are malleable: it is easy to change their shape, and deciding on how and whether to do this is an ongoing process. Moreover, the Netherlands is a small and densely populated country. At every spot, the interests of many people converge and, not infrequently – actually, continuously – conflict. Debate on the basis of (visual) arguments is important. I will discuss a particular case of some landscape photographs in which locations were represented *in a certain way* that formed a publicly shared visual argument in this process.

In spring 2014, photographer Loek van Vliet (1988) was commissioned by a coalition of Dutch nature and environmental organisations to photograph four 'Natural Climate Buffers'. These zones in the Netherlands are especially vulnerable to the threat of flooding as a result of climate change. In the past, these areas were re-shaped by a coalition of these environmental organisations in order to make them useful in an adaptation strategy to channel the consequences of climate change and render them harmless. What is special about these Climate Buffers is that they make no use of geometrically shaped, 'modernist' concrete dykes and waterworks that were en vogue in spatial planning in the twentieth century, but which ultimately turned out to be bad for the ecosystem. Instead, the Climate Buffers were 'built with nature', giving the water more space and turning these areas into environments that are ecologically sound and attractive for human recreation once again.

Van Vliet photographed four of the Climate Buffers in such a way that the similarities between these new landscapes and the more 'authentic' landscapes we know from Dutch historical painting become clear. Four famous historical Dutch landscape paintings were selected and paired with the four Climate Buffer landscapes. Van Vliet studied the stylistic methods of the landscape painters of the Dutch Golden Age and translated these into a photographic process to depict the four Climate Buffers.

Figs. 5.1 a-h Results of a photography commission (2013) by a coalition of Dutch nature and environmental organisations to Loek van Vliet, to photograph four so-called 'Natural Climate Buffers' areas in the Netherlands



Jacob Isaaksz van Ruisdael, *Marsh*, ca. 1665, oil on canvas, 72,5 x 99 cm, collection The State



Loek van Vliet, *Dwingelderveld* (Natural Climate Buffer in the north of the

Hermitage Museum, St.-Petersburg, inv. no. GE-934 © The State Hermitage Museum/Vladimir Terebenin



Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch, *Beach with shellfish gatherers*, 1891, oil on canvas, 63 x 83 cm, collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, loan of the Willem van der Vorm foundation, inv. no. VdV 86 © Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam/Studio Tromp

Netherlands), 2014
chromogenic print on dibond, 80 x 120 cm
commissioned by the Natural Climate Buffer Coalition



Loek van Vliet, *Roggeplaat (Natural Climate Buffer in the Northsea near the shores of the southwest of the Netherlands)*, 2014
chromogenic print on dibond, 80 x 120 cm
commissioned by the Natural Climate Buffer Coalition



Jan van Goyen, *View of Arnhem*, ca. 1644
oil on panel, 26 x 41,5 cm, collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-3250



Loek van Vliet, *Vlijmen/Den Bosch (Natural Climate Buffer in the south of the Netherlands)*, 2014
chromogenic print on dibond, 80 x 120 cm
commissioned by the Natural Climate Buffer Coalition



Salomon van Ruysdael, *The Ferry*, 1647, oil on canvas, 91 x 130,5 cm, collection Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels
 © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels / Photo d'art Speltdoorn & Fils, Bruxelles



Loek van Vliet, *Ooijen Wanssum (Natural Climate Buffer in the south of the Netherlands)*, 2014
 chromogenic print on dibond, 80 x 120 cm
 commissioned by the Natural Climate Buffer Coalition

The resulting photographs were presented to those parties, authorities and politicians that were involved at the conference where the actual physical landscapes were presented. The point that this photography project makes is to show that the identity of these new Natural Climate Buffers is closer to the landscapes that we know from Dutch historical painting. The historical Dutch landscapes are still tremendously popular with the Dutch themselves as well as with others around the world, not only in the form of fine art paintings in the museum circuit, but also when reproduced and mass-distributed in countless popular manifestations, such as calendars, posters and biscuit tins. Because of the similarities with historical landscapes, Dutch inhabitants as well as foreign tourists identify more easily with these new, ecologically healthy Climate Buffers than with the modernist industrialised landscapes of the twentieth century. Thus, the photography project provides nature and environmental organisations with a new, artistic argument for ecological change. The argument was picked up by a national newspaper and shared with the Dutch public in a two-page feature in 2014, with the headline 'Painting with light, in the footsteps of the old masters'.⁵²⁵

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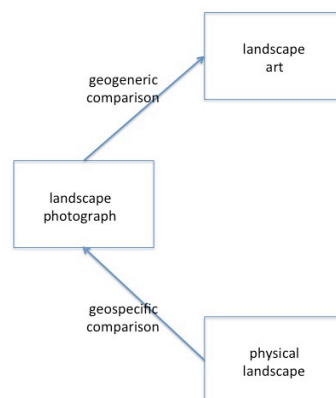
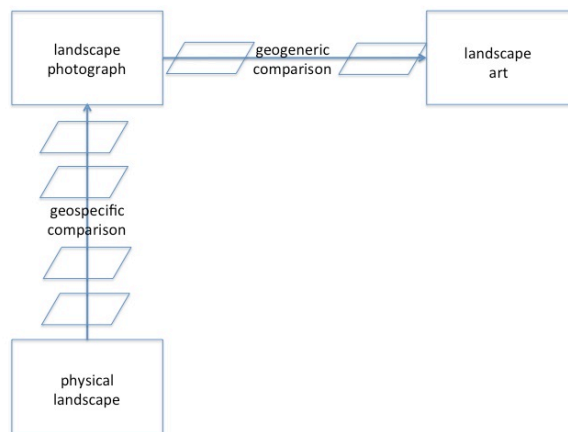
If it is possible to identify meaning of a place and how this is visualised in photography, can we, in reverse, derive from these photographs what instructions landscape architects would have to get in order to *render* the same meaning to a newly to be designed or constructed landscape? In 1.2.3, I outlined that in landscape architecture and in landscape development in general, cultural-historical dimensions are rendered in landscapes, amongst others by the commissioning of artists.⁵²⁶ My idea is to more explicitly use landscape photographs as visual arguments in the discussion on the alteration of

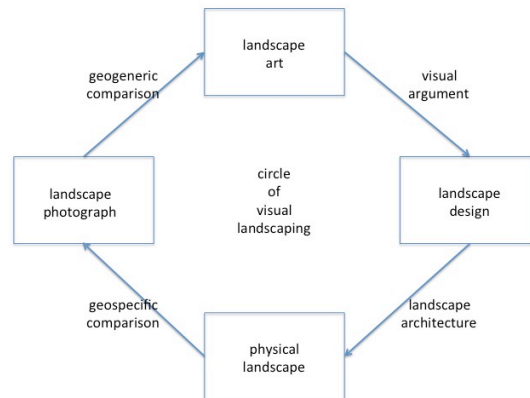
⁵²⁵ Sandra Smalenburg, 'Schilderend met licht, de oude meesters achterna', *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 August 2014, pp. 6-7.

⁵²⁶ See also Stephenson 2008 for an itinerative process of community-based landscape.

landscape. Landscape photography, through its indexical relation to reality, combined with its character of being a two-dimensional work of art, is especially suitable for relating patches of physical land to pictorial conventions of landscape, such as those expressed in landscape painting or artistic landscape photography.

My interdisciplinary method enhances this visual argumentation about landscape through landscape photography. The georeferencing of landscape photographs and the geospecific comparison of a landscape photograph with earlier landscape pictures of the place facilitate the determination of the pictorial conventions of a specific location. The geogeneric comparison helps to determine other landscapes that the photographer deliberately made his place resemble. By a particular choice of visual means, the photographer made the place belong to another type of landscape, thus giving it a certain meaning. If we are able to identify meaningful places in a landscape, can we, in reverse, determine which landscape elements are characteristic for that landscape? Can we, departing from the analysed landscape art, deduce instructions for landscape architecture and for the ordering of elements in a particular space? I would argue that it is certainly possible to answer the last question positively, as the process illustrated in the schemes below illustrates (figs. 5.1 a-c).





Both cultural geography, see, for example Creswell (2004) and landscape architecture, for example Steenbergen and Reh (1996), interpret landscape architecture as an act of gardening.⁵²⁷ In Steenbergen and Reh, the comparison of landscape architecture with gardening is a theme throughout the whole book, with the authors analysing great European gardens such as Versailles and the gardens around the Villa Medici in Tuscany, in the context of the surrounding landscapes and as landscape architecture. It is the shaping of the physical landscape and introducing and ordering landscape elements in such a way that a meaning of landscape is constructed. How meanings of gardens are constructed is illustrated by the many examples in the book *Giardini, orti e labirinti* (2005) by Impelluso.

Contemporary landscape photography can provide visual argumentation for the discussion on the development of landscape. It can make visible how its current ‘face’ relates to pictorial conventions of the place; it can provide persuasive visual arguments, for example, of how the physical landscape is made to look different as a result of the way the photographer intervened in the landscape. If it is possible to *derive* the meaning of an existing place by determining which pictorial landscape image it *resembles*, it should also be possible to *give* meaning to a place by *making it look like* a pictorial landscape image. This notion, however, does not lie within the scope of this dissertation. This would be an interesting path for further research into the realm of landscape architecture.

⁵²⁷ Creswell 2004, especially pp. 7-10; Steenbergen & Reh 1996.