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## **The Landscape: The Terraqueous Skin of the World**

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# The Landscape

## The Terraqueous Skin of the World

Ali Shobeiri

*“It is a moment of ritualized reverence wherein power acquiesces to a subordinate’s symbolic display of powerlessness. Kneeling was designed to avoid atrocity. It is not the result of a stalemate but an act of absolution.”*

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The skin is a surface that separates the inside from the outside while belonging to neither of them: it is a sheer instance of liminality wherein the impervious borders of things are turned into the porous boundaries of beings. The landscape, the skin of the world, is such a leaky boundary, which imbricates and implicates with terrestrial organisms while exceeding any organicity. By examining the recent photograph taken by contemporary Dutch artist Roosmarijn Pallandt (fig.1), this paper reads her representation of the landscape as *the terraqueous skin of the world*: an organelles organ that conduces the possibility of haptic perception through photography. To do this, it first draws on Tim Ingold’s theory of “surface vision” and then employs Edward S. Casey’s method of “liminology” to eventually apperceive the skin of the landscape as what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “a being-to-itself insofar as it is from side to side outside itself.”

Keywords: landscape, skin, boundary, liminal, haptic perception



Figure 1. Untitled photograph. Part of the photo series A-un. © Roosmarijn Pallandt

If there is a 'knower' and if there is a 'known', if one of these lies apart from the other and if there is a process of 'knowing' which involves both, then skin lies somewhere along the line of march, and must be taken into account.

Arthur F. Bentley, "*The Human Skin*"

(Arthur F. Bentley, 1941, 1)

FOR MILLENNIA, if not more, skin has been seen as a differentiating surface between the body and the rest of the universe, functioning as an existential veneer between the knower and the known. For both physicians and metaphysicians alike, to know would mean to disclose what lies deep beneath the skin of things, where the deep-seated kernel of an organism resides. Surgeons open up the skin to see what lies beyond their perceptual reach. Likewise, epistemologists have reflected on the skin to comprehend what lies beyond their conceptual reach. All organisms, from multicellular animals to unicellular structures, are demarcated and taxonomized according to that which resides under and above their skin. To a certain extent, the skin is the only denominator that is both materially and conceptually shared among all beings, since without it, all natural and artificial organs would lose their intimate territories. While distinguishing the internal domain from the external realm, the skin resides delicately, and at times imperceptibly, at the verge of both, wherein the inner and the outer of an organism meet each other in a zone of sheer indistinction. That is why the skin has remained a theoretical conundrum over eons, not only to biologists or physiologists but also to philosophers and anthropologists: to anyone who deemed the skin to be an ontological veil that safeguards the inside from the outside. Like all organisms, the Earth, too, possesses skin. That skin, which covers the surface of the Earth from side to side, is the landscape.

In this paper, by drawing on a recent photograph created by the contemporary Dutch photographer Roosmarijn Pallandt, I regard her representation of the landscape as *the terraqueous skin of the world*: an organless organ that conduces the possibility of haptic perception through photography. To do this, I first engage with the anthropologist Tim Ingold's theory of "surface vision", whereby he advocates the possibility of haptic vision by attending to the concepts of "complexion" and "self-shadowing". Next, to underscore the liminality of the landscape which suggests that it lies as a foraminous surface in between the Earth and sky, I will employ the philosopher Edward S. Casey's distinction

between borders and boundaries. Finally, to present how Pallandt's photograph manifests the landscape as the skin of the World, I will draw on the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of the skin as that which exceeds any organicity. To set off this venture, I begin my analysis by unpacking the etymology of the term landscape in order to conceive it as a surface that provides hapticity.

## The Landscape: A Colossal Surface Caressed by Our Eyes

Can I not also wipe a surface with my eyes?

Tim Ingold, "Surface Vision"

(Tim Ingold 2017, 101)

The mood of landscape permeates all its separate components, frequently without it being attributable to any of them.

George Simmel, "The Philosophy of Landscape"

(George Simmel [1913] 2007, 26)

The contemporary usage of the term landscape is rooted in the fifteenth-century German term *landschaft*, as "shaped land, a cluster of temporary dwellings", and in the seventeenth-century Dutch word *landschap*, which referred to the representation of such a place (Lippard 1997, 8). Since its very conception in the geographical and cultural lexicon of the West, landscape has been associated with humans dwelling in places and how they visually perceived those experiences. Yet, not everyone has the same way of experiencing or perceiving places, as each place evokes a different set of meanings to individuals, both in front of their eyes and in their mind's eyes. For example, while a landscape can be a topographical view or a geopolitical documentation of that view to one viewer, the same landscape can be a synthesis of inexplicable affects to another one. Simply put, what a landscape is, depends on the beholder's understanding of the place, wherein one's social, economic, political, and affective life is acted out. As geographer Donald W. Meinig noted some decades ago, the same landscape can be viewed as nature, habitat, artifact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, aesthetic, and, of course, simply as a place, depending on what attributes and qualities one elicits from and assigns to it (Meinig 1979, 45). In any case, irrespective of its multi-layered manifestations, aquatic, telluric, or a melange of both, the landscape is indisputably a surface, although an immense one that overlays the entire Earth with variegated textures.

Like with all the surfaces that we experience during our lives, such as tables, pillows, walls, roads, or human faces, one of the inherent features of the landscape, too, is its texture: the very material fabric that determines its externally manifested morphologies. This means, without a texture, no matter how rough, soft, liquid, solid, gritty, or lumpy it is, there cannot be any surface, because texture functions as the *sui generis* disposition of surfaces. It is through our bodily engagement with a texture that we come to distinguish diverse surfaces from one another, by rubbing or stroking them, by nudging or grazing them. To be precise, it is through our tactile involvement with a texture, whether gently caressing it or firmly traversing it, that its very surface quality is revealed to us.

For instance, as Ingold reminds us, it is through the simple act of “wiping a surface by hand” that we register “every bump or hollow, every crease or fold, not as a feature set upon the surface ... but as a variation intrinsic to the surface itself” (Ingold 2017, 101). Ingold suggests that to wipe a surface is to apprehend its intrinsic surface qualities with our hands; it is to realize that all the kittenish sensations on the tip of our fingers are, in fact, innate constituents of the surface itself. Similar to tactility that requires physical engagement with the matter, as one’s hand grasps a tree or one’s foot touches the floor, Ingold has put forward the possibility of “haptic perception” whereby we can “touch” surfaces with our eyes. Under the framework of haptic perception, one can caress the landscape with one’s eyes, as if by transmogrifying the optical precepts into tactile sensations. To be able to conceive of haptic perception as a built-in feature of surfaces such as landscapes, Ingold suggests that we should attend to two characteristics embedded in all surfaces: “self-shadowing” and “complexion”. He explains the former category as follows:

Every fold of the skin, every stitch of the cloth, every ripple of water, particle of grit or blade of grass is picked out in the contrast between the relative illumination of its light-facing convexities and the relative darkness of the concavities in their shade. A crease is the shadow of a fold, a hollow the shadow of a bump. But since fold and crease, or bump and hollow, are *of* the surface rather than *on* it, the surface, in its dappled texture, is *self-shadowing*. (Ingold 2017, 102)

To perceive “self-shadowing” as a haptic quality is to recognize that each hole or bulge, every crack or mound, and all that which induces the overall ruggedness or fragility of a surface are indeed parts of its material constituents,

and not qualities appearing on it. That is, self-shadowing declares that a surface comes into being thanks to the kaleidoscopic existence of its textures, whether fuzzy, parched, and bumpy, or woolly, sticky, and lumpy. To comprehend the close rapport between surface and texture as a means of haptic perception, one needs to gaze across the recent landscape photograph of the Dutch artist Roosmarijn Pallandt.

In June 2021, Pallandt exhibited a series of photographs, video installations, and textiles at De Ketelfactory in Schiedam, the Netherlands, through which she paid careful attention to the haptic quality of representation. The exhibition was called *A-un*, meaning “breath” in Japanese. As a part of this exhibition, **figure 1** aspires to expose the material affinity between the actual landscape in the world and the embodied landscape in the world of photography. Taken in 2016 in the South-East part of Hokkaido in Japan, it shows how a texture granularity can become a vehicle of haptic perception. By capturing the concatenated yet refined textures of the material landscape in Japan, Pallandt’s photograph invites the viewer to touch the smooth cliffs at the bottom, caress the lustrous sky at the top, and meander through the gritty bushes on the ancient rock. This phenomenon is further intensified by using the Japanese Gampi silk-tissue paper for the print, whose translucent but robust quality makes it an ideal medium for augmenting the subtle texture qualities of the landscape. The multiplicity of visible textures on the photo deftly reminds the viewer of its tactile quality, that none of the perceptible parts of the landscape is cast onto it, but are all in fact rather enmeshed in it, as its indivisible parts. In other words, Pallandt’s photograph makes it evident that all the reflective convexities and absorbent concavities of this physical landscape are *of* its surface and not *on* it. This means that each dim ray of light and every modicum of shade in the photo proclaims its belonging to the surface of the landscape. It is through this realization that it becomes possible to caress the landscape with our eyes, to feel its breaches, and to touch its creases, all under the conceptual rubric of “self-shadowing”.

However, to think of the landscape as a surface that provides the possibility of haptic perception also requires another inherent feature of surfaces, that is: “complexation”. For Ingold, the term “complexion”, which commonly refers to the natural disposition of one’s skin, reveals the impossibility of “separating expression from affect in the encounter with another living being”. That is why it can “epitomize the constitutive quality of any surface to which a haptic vision attends” (Ingold 2017, 103). If complexion can foreground the haptic quality of a surface, it is because it belongs neither to the exterior nor the interior of



the surface, but simply accentuates the fact that a surface, like one's skin, exists as a dividing veil between the inside and the outside. With complexion, Ingold notes, "the surface emerges in the very fusion of an affectivity that intensifies from within and the weathering – including such atmospheric effects as sunshine, wind, and rains – that brings its influence to bear from without" (Ingold 2017, 104). To put it differently, the complexion of a surface is the equivalent of its mood. Like a person's temperament that is exuded from within and endured from without in an ethereal interaction with the environment, the complexion of a surface is that which pervades its entirety without belonging to any of its components. Ingold's formulation of complexion, which acts as a reminder of haptic vision in surfaces, corresponds to what George Simmel once referred to as "the mood of a landscape". He explains this point in a rather long passage where he compares a person's and a landscape's mood as follows:

When we refer to the mood of a person, we mean that coherent ensemble that either permanently or temporarily colors the entirety of his or her psychic constituents. It is not itself something discrete, and often not an attribute of any one individual trait. All the same, it is that commonality where all these individual traits interconnect. In the same way, the mood of landscape permeates all its separate components, frequently without it being attributable to any one of them. In a way that is difficult to specify, each component partakes in it, but a mood prevails which is neither external to these constituents, nor is it composed of them. (Simmel 2007, 26)

Looking at Pallandt's photograph, one senses a primeval mood, a primordial complexion, and an unfathomable sense of harmony that perfuses through all the material constituents of the landscape: from the bottom of the corroded cliff to the top of the eroded tree; from the pellucid sky to the caliginous ground. It is this inexplicable mood/complexion which permeates the entire photo without being specifiable to any of its separate parts that reinforces the haptic quality of the photo. In that, if "self-shadowing" allows one to touch the landscape via the richness of its textures, then attending to the complexion of the surface, or the mood of the landscape, enables one to come into unison with its atmosphere: to breathe in its crisp air, to feel its moist ground, and, in turn, to sense its antediluvian ambience.

Nevertheless, not only do self-shadowing and complexion establish the theoretical foundation of haptic vision, through which we can caress the landscape in our mind's eye, but they also reveal that a surface, such as the

landscape, is marked by porosity and perviousness. Like the human skin that can breathe in and out, the landscape is an organism sustained by the continuous process of taking in from and releasing into the environment. That means, as I will discuss further below, that the landscape is never a border, but a boundary between the inside and the outside.

## The Skin: An Organless Organ

Borders close in and close off; boundaries open up and open out.

Edward S. Casey, *The World On Edge*  
(Edward S. Casey 2017, 15)

The skin does not envelop a set of organs; it develops the presence to the world maintained by those organs.

Jean-Luc Nancy 2021, “The World’s Fragile Skin”  
(Jean-Luc Nancy 2021, 13)

Whereas it is common to think of the landscape as a dividing border between the Earth and the sky, if one considers it to be a living organism that hosts a myriad of other beings, such as plants, bacteria, fungi, algae, and insects, then it loses its stern separating power; in turn, the landscape becomes a boundary. One of Casey’s intriguing insights into the study of perceptual and phenomenal edges, which he terms a “liminological” study, lies in his distinction between borders and boundaries. According to him, borders are essentially a means of closure, exclusion, and hence impermeability. The effect of having a border between two countries, Casey notes, “is not just the restriction of traffic or trespass but their exclusion wherever possible. Every border is constructed such that it is closed or subject to closure” (Casey 2011, 94). In contrast to borders, boundaries are a type of edge that is intrinsically made for transmission, porosity, and thus permeability between the two grounds that they distinguish. The essential difference between borders and boundaries is that while in the former exclusion and closure are embedded in them as their very purposes, in the latter porosity and permeability “are built into them from the start” (Casey 2011, 95). To be clear, “while borders are established to articulate definite separations between two grounds, boundaries are made to dissolve precisely these separations, thereby allowing the distinguished spaces to communicate through them” (Shobeiri 2021, 86).

Natural landscape and human skin are both the epitomes of boundaries, for both are porous surfaces that are continually soaking up from and giving out into their environment, thus resisting the impervious quality of borders. Like human skins that are in a constant process of *perspiration*, through which they quite literally drip into their surroundings, landscapes are in a continuous course of *transpiration* through non-human organisms that reside within them. As Ingold notes, the category of “non-humans” not only includes the immediately visible but also comprises “a blank category that covers everything else that is given independently of people, including “sunlight and clouds, wild plants and animals, rocks and minerals and landforms” (Ingold 2012, 431). Thus, to perceive landscape as a boundary is to see it as a leaky edge between the Earth and the sky, wherein a multitude of non-humans are ceaselessly absorbing from and discharging into their environs. It is precisely thanks to the non-human inhabitants of the landscape that it becomes a skin-like boundary: a transmissible edge that allows the inner to comingle with the outer. In other words, to deem landscape as a boundary is to recognize its liminality; it is to view it as a permeable surface between the inside and the outside, always in flux and never in closure. As the philosopher Jeff Malpas has put it:

The liminal is that which stands in between, but in standing between it does not make some point of rest. Instead, the liminal always carries a movement with it – a crossing, a movement towards or away from, a movement into or out of. Etymologically, ‘liminal’ comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold, but related also to the Latin *limes*, meaning boundary. (Malpas 2016, 161–162)

Landscape is a boundary insofar as it retains its liminal presence between what it enfolds and what it unfolds, inasmuch as it is seen as a threshold between the external and the internal worlds. Seen under this light, landscape seeps into the conceptual territory of skin, always pervious vis-à-vis what it shrouds. As Nancy contends, “skins are not impervious to each other; they are porous by definition, organic and metaphysical at the same time” (Nancy, 2021, 14). If for Nancy the skin is simultaneously physical and metaphysical, this is because of its sheer liminal presence between what it encloses and what it discloses, in that it is a boundary that prompts transition and seepage, and not a border that brings about closure. Although “the skin itself is an organ”, Nancy contends, “this organ exceeds organicity” (Nancy 2021, 13). To put it another way, for Nancy the skin is essentially a fluid construct, a leaky surface, a titillating veil, a comingling boundary between the inside and the outside. It is, concisely put,

an organless organ. To unravel the protean manifestations of the skin, Nancy eloquently articulates the qualities of the skin as follows:

The skin is not the site of a calculation nor a measurement: it is a site of passage, transit and transport, traffic and transaction. It rubs against and irritates, mixes and distinguishes, comes against or flatters it. Skin makes hair stand on end, is exhausting, shivering, retractile, caressing, lubricating, pressing, trembling. It makes itself into (*se fait*) the lens of the eye, eardrum, tongue, vagina, olfactory bulb, mucous membrane, papillae. It gets excited, stirred, heated, electrified, repulsed or exhaled. In all respects, the skin translates, betrays, (*trahit*), transpires, transudes the palpitating singularity of the enigma of *a being-to-itself insofar as it is from side to side outside itself*, nearby and far-off, multiple, always floating and responding to the thrusting of the world's breeze, breath, and gusts. (Nancy 2021, 14)

Looking at Pallandt's photograph via Nancy's prism of the skin at this point, it becomes possible to conceive of her landscape as the skin of the world. In that, as I have discussed throughout this paper, the skin essentially comes into being as a liminal surface between the two grounds that it synchronously divides and adjoins, thereby becoming a translucent and transmissive, transpiring and perspiring, indeterminate organ in the world. Viewing landscape as the skin of the world means the sheer acknowledgment of its manifold organicity and inborn liminality. On the one hand, every tangible and intangible thing in Pallandt's photo, from the breeze of air to the crease of the Earth, are testimonies to the intrinsic liminality of the landscape: the fact that it transpires through its terrestrial, aquatic, and aerate things. On the other hand, every visible and invisible being in her photo, from the shriveled shrubs to the weathered rocks, bear witness to the multiple organicities of the landscape: the fact that it perspires through all its non-human beings. They remind us that, like the skin, the landscape liquefies, solidifies, withers, swells, precipitates, and desiccates. As such, to view Pallandt's landscape as the skin of the world is to recognize it as a permeable surface between the Earth and the sky, wherein the impervious borders of things are turned into the porous boundaries of beings. It is to see her landscape as a leaky boundary that imbricates and implicates a myriad of non-human organisms in its circumambience, thereby becoming an organless organ that conduces the possibility of haptic perception through photography. Or, to use Nancy's terms, it is conceiving her photographed landscape as "a being-to-itself insofar as it is from side to side outside itself", enclosed from within and exposed from without: a terraqueous skin par excellence.

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## Short Biography

**Ali Shobeiri** is an Assistant Professor of Photographic Studies and Visual Arts Theory at Leiden University (NL). His current research and publications are in the fields of photography theories, phenomenology, spatial studies, and human geography. He is the author of *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography* (Leiden University Press, 2021) and co-editor of *Animation and Memory* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020). His upcoming book is called *Psychosomatic Imagery: Photographic Reflections on Mental Disorders*.

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