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Deconstruction of the Landscape in Contemporary Art Based on the Example of the Installation *Do Plants Dream of the Future?* by Igor Eškinja

Abstract: In Igor Eškinja's installation *Do Plants Dream of the Future?* the main artistic motif is the living plant world growing in specific locations. The theme is therefore a landscape, but at the same time an anti-landscape because the plants are weeds, and the location is not determined by the natural, but by the industrial environment. The artist scrutinizes the plants in such an artificial environment and the nature here is inseparable from the urban layer. Moreover, the binarity of nature and culture is illustrated throughout the entire artwork, as well as the paradoxical nature of this relationship. This text aims to demonstrate to what extent is Eškinja's installation is a landscape and what it tells us about the topic of nature in contemporary art.

Keywords: identity; installation; *Do Plants Dream of the Future?*; weed; landscape; space; wall-papers; Igor Eškinja.

Introduction

In traditional, humanistic art history, landscape (French: *paysage*; German: *Landschaft*; Italian: *paesaggio*) is a specific genre in painting, sculpture, and graphic arts¹ depicting scenes from nature with “a sense of proportion and stylized forms”² and through which the relationship between Western man and the external world of nature is identified.³ For example, in the introduction of the book *Landscape into Art*, art historian, Kenneth Clark explains why he chose landscape as the topic of his research, stating that it is in fact the landscape that was the main artistic motif in 19th-century painting, and without understanding 19th-century art, it is impossible

¹ *Enciklopedija likovnih umjetnosti 3 [Encyclopaedia of Fine Arts 3]* (Zagreb: Yugoslav Institute of Lexicography, 1964), 644.

² André Lhote, *O pejzažu [On Landscape]* (Zagreb: Mladost, 1956), 10.

³ Miško Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik suvremene umjetnosti [A Glossary of Contemporary Art]* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2005), 448.

to understand or evaluate contemporary art.⁴ He also states that the research of landscape painting gives an important contribution to the creation of our concept of nature. We are surrounded by things that have a life and a shape different from ours: trees, flowers, grass, rivers, hills, and clouds. They have inspired us with their beauty and curiosity for centuries. We recreate these scenes in our imagination in order to render our moods. However, landscape painting also marks the stages of our understanding of nature that have been developing since the Middle Ages, when the human spirit tried once again to establish harmony with the environment. In the previous cycle, in antiquity, when the Hellenistic interest in men prevailed, nature had a subordinate role.⁵

These opening remarks of Clark's book are commented on by the contemporary art theorist and historian, W. J. T. Mitchell in the text *Imperial Landscape*, stating that we have come a long way from his innocent descriptions. In particular, it is the 'we' for whom Clark speaks with such assurance that can no longer express itself outside of quotation marks. Mitchell wonders who is this 'we' that defines itself by its difference from trees, flowers, grasses, rivers, hills, and clouds and then increases this difference by transposing it in the reflection of its own moods and ideas. In fact, Mitchell argues that 'we' know today that there is no simple, unproblematic 'we' that corresponds to the universal human spirit that seeks harmony with the environment.⁶ Therefore, he invites us to think of the landscape not as an object to be viewed or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.⁷ Contrary to Clark's approach, Mitchell advocates a culturally oriented history and theory of art,⁸ and claims that landscape is not a genre but a medium of exchange between man and nature, a scene mediated by specific historical and geographical cultural means.⁹ The following text describes the installation by the contemporary artist from Rijeka, Igor Eškinja, which is not a landscape but can be interpreted as such by relying on Mitchell's concept. Questioning the concept of landscape in a modern and postmodern context using the example of Eškinja's work, the text examines what a landscape really is or what it means as a phenomenon in contemporary culture.

In Igor Eškinja's installation *Do Plants Dream of the Future?* the main artistic motif is the living plant world growing in specific locations. The theme is therefore a landscape, but at the same time an anti-landscape because the plants are weeds, and the location is not determined by the natural, but by the industrial environment. The artist scrutinizes the plants in such an artificial environment and the nature here

⁴ Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), xvii.

⁵ Clark, *Landscape into Art*, 1.

⁶ William John Thomas Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6.

⁷ William John Thomas Mitchell, "Introduction," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.

⁸ William John Thomas Mitchell, *Ikonologija. Slika, tekst, ideologija [Iconology. The Image, the Text, the ideology]* (Zagreb: Antibarbarus, 2010).

⁹ Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 5.

is inseparable from the urban layer. Moreover, the binarity of nature and culture is illustrated throughout the entire artwork, as well as the paradoxical nature of this relationship. The art installation was created within the “Dopolavoro” flagship of Rijeka – European Capital of Culture 2020, addressing the topics of work and leisure and their metamorphoses, but also what remains when there is no more work. It mainly dealt with the post-transition image of the city of Rijeka in which industry and factories, once representative elements of Rijeka’s identity, are now falling apart and disappearing. Eškinja finds here the opening for his work that is based on the motif and symbolism of vegetation growing in abandoned factories and industrial plants, and he researches the biological diversity and the numbers of alien vegetation, collaborating with biologists. The artist contemplates the vitality and the power of the plants occupying the space in this process and its meaning for the life and identity of the city. He photographs and digitally elaborates the plants from the selected sites and transforms them into designer wallpaper patterns, creating a new space.¹⁰

By turning plants that we usually do not notice into representative samples and by “telling the story about the plants that came to life thanks to the absence of the humans in a space created by humans”¹¹, the installation speaks about nature, society, and space and their essential connection. Moreover, an installation is a type of art in which the decisive role is played not only by the elements of which it consists (in this case wallpaper), but also by the space itself. According to Boris Groys, “this space is not abstract or neutral but is itself a form of life.”¹²

Landscape

In the opening of *Landscape and Power*, editor Mitchell points out that in the 20th century, landscape development was marked by two major revolutions. The first revolution (associated with modernism) tried to read the landscape history mainly through the history of landscape painting and to narrativize that history as a progressive path to pure art, and purification of the visual field. The second revolution (associated with postmodernism) wanted to decentralize the role of painting and pure formalistic aesthetics in favor of a semiotic and hermeneutic approach that sees the landscape as the allegory of psychological and ideological positions.¹³ Mitchell names the first approach as “contemplative” as it aims to clarify verbal, narrative or historical elements and to present a painting shaped for transcendental consciousness – either of the “transparent eye”, i.e., the experience of presence or proximity, or the “innocent

¹⁰ The first exhibition took place in June 2020 in the DeltaLab venue (Delta 5) in Rijeka, organized by the Drugo More association.

¹¹ Interview with Igor Eškinja, in Aneli Dragojević Mijatović, “Igor Eškinja priprema rad za EPK: Život koji niče iz nekadašnjih propalih tvornica,” *Novi list* 6 (October 2019).

¹² Boris Groys, “Umjetnost u doba biopolitike – od umjetničkog djela k umjetničkoj dokumentaciji,” in *Učiniti stvari vidljivima. Strategije suvremene umjetnosti*, ed. Nada Beroš (Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006.), 21.

¹³ Mitchell, “Introduction,” 1.

eye”. Mitchell refers to the other strategy calling it interpretative, as it is based on an attempt to decode the landscape, as a body of defined characters. Clearly, the landscape can be deciphered as a text: natural phenomena such as trees, animals, rocks, water, and dwellings can be read as symbols of religious, psychological, and political allegories. Characteristic compositions and shapes (uplifted or closed areas, part of the day, the position of the beholder, types of human figures, etc.) can be related to general and narrative types such as pastoral, exotic, sublime and picturesque. Mitchell encompasses both approaches in a model that does not ask only what is a landscape or what it means, but also what does it *do*, how it acts as cultural practice.¹⁴

The approach to Eškinja’s installation in this paper originates from the contemporary contemplation of the landscape topic, just as in Mitchell’s text. These encompass issues such as: what have we done and what are we doing to our environment, what does the environment do in return to us, how do we establish what we do to each other, and how is this doing represented in the medium called landscape? The landscape is a dynamic medium in which we live, move, and shape our own lives, but also a medium that changes from time to time or depending on the location. In contrast to the traditional understanding of the landscape as a fixed genre (sublime, beautiful, picturesque, pastoral landscape) or fixed medium (literature, painting, photography), or as a fixed venue as an object for visual contemplation or interpretation, the contemporary approaches explore how the landscape circulates as a means of exchange, as a venue of visual appropriation or as a focus for shaping the identity.¹⁵

According to Mitchell, as a medium, the landscape is a material tool such as language or image, embedded in the tradition of cultural labelling and communication, i.e., a symbolic form capable of recalling and expressing meaning and value. It has therefore a structure similar to money, functioning as a special type of good that has a unique symbolic role in the value exchange system. Moreover, the landscape is seen mainly as the mean of cultural expression, and not only as a genre in painting or as fine art. Landscape can be represented by painting, drawing, graphics, photography, film, theatrical script, as well as in writing, speech, music and other ‘sound images’. Before all these secondary representations, however, the landscape is above all a physical and multisensory medium (earth, rocks, vegetation, water, sky, sounds and quiet, light and darkness, etc.) in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, both as physical transformations of the space through gardening or architecture, and space shaped by the nature. Mitchell states that the title of Clark’s book, *Landscape into Art*, actually sums up his thesis; the landscape is already artificial at the moment of observation, long before it becomes the main topic of the pictural representation.¹⁶ Thus, Mitchell compares the expansion of 18th and 19th century landscape painting with the expansion of the culture and civilization in the natural, untouched world, that occurred in the same period. He points out that such a thing was called progressive

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2.

¹⁶ Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” 14.

and even natural. Empires move outward, into space, like moving forward in time. The viewpoints thus obtained are not only views of space but also the projections of future development and exploitation. According to Mitchell, the landscape is, like imperialism, a subject of nostalgia in the postcolonial and postmodern era, reflecting the times in which the metropolitan culture was still able to envisage progress and its future in an unlimited appropriation and exploitation of nature.¹⁷

The landscape in Eškinja's work is already artificial, elaborated, and intentionally presented as a design pattern, as we see it in photographs, commercials and posters, but not in nature. Moreover, the semiotic features of the landscape and the historical narratives they generate, and which Mitchell associates in his text with the imperialism discourse, can also be associated with some of the elements of Eškinja's work. A touch of nostalgia can be felt in almost the entire installation. It refers to Rijeka's golden era and its industrial history¹⁸ that accompanies modernist progress and development ideas, expressed by the artist with an intertwining of plants and fragments of industrial and production plants that are now decaying and disappearing. The landscape here also has a role of deviation from the modernist attitude or its criticism, which brings up questions that are the key to the post-transition Rijeka, with a much broader attitude towards the environment. The plants, whose vitality and powerfulness of the conquering process of the industrial venues the artist relates to the transformation of the identity of Rijeka, an industrial city and a possible formation of new identities including postmodern values such as ecological awareness, biodiversity, coexistence with nature, etc. The work, therefore, seems relevant for reflecting on the topic of landscape in contemporary art and within the discourses dealing with these areas. Eškinja's installation deconstructs landscape as a two-dimensional mimetic image into a three-dimensional real space in which physical dimensions, cultural layers or mental stories overlap and can also be seen as a "hyperlandscape"¹⁹. Such a concept was inaugurated in the late 1960s by a group of artists (Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria, Dennis Oppenheim, Michael Heizer, Christo, etc.) with works in open areas of land, which can be seen as the beginning of a postmodern approach to the landscape.²⁰

The landscape, according to Mitchell, places the beholder in a more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site: "landscape (whether urban or

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ More on this topic in: Olga Magaš, "Industrijska arhitektura [Industrial Architecture]," in *Arhitektura historizma u Rijeci [Architecture of Historicism in Rijeka]* (Rijeka: Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2001); Radmila Matejčić, *Kako čitati grad [How to Read a City]* (Rijeka: Adamić, 2007); Jasna Rotim-Malvić, "Industrija [Industry]," in: *Arhitektura secesije u Rijeci [Architecture of Secession in Rijeka]* (Rijeka: Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2007); Ema Aničić, *RIP – Riječka industrijska priča [R.I.P. – Rijeka's Industrial Past]* (Rijeka: Rijeka City Museum, 2014); Velid Đekić, *Zvali su me Industrijska. Biografski hod riječkom Baranjskom ulicom dug tri stoljeća [They Used to Call Me Industrijska. A Three-Century Long Biographical Walk along Baranjska Street in Rijeka]* (Rijeka: Baklje Art and Culture Society, Pro Torpedo, 2020).

¹⁹ Sébastien Marot, "Envisioning Hyperlandscape," HAL, <https://hal.science/hal-03506052/document>, acc. on February 6, 2023.

²⁰ Henry M. Sayre, "Open Space. Landscape and Postmodern Sublime," in *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 211.

rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which ‘we’ (figured as ‘the figures’ in the landscape) find – or lose – ourselves.”²¹ The text will try to present how Eškinja’s installation completely demonstrates this thought.

Weeds

According to the artist, the first step in creating the installation was to find a form that would link the story of the city of Rijeka and its industry of the 19th and 20th centuries, when the city went through significant development and when a great part of its identity was created, to the current situation of the beginning of the 21st century in which the identity almost completely collapsed.²² Hence the focus of the piece is on the central parts of Rijeka, that were once used as a port or industrial zones. These are six urban districts, and three of them were created by filling and by a radical transformation of the natural environment, such as Delta, Brajdica and the breakwater, and three are historical industrial units, such as the venue of the former sugar refinery “Rikard Benčić”, which is also the first industrial complex in Croatia, the former paper factory “Hartera” and the so-called Industrial Street in the area of Mlaka:

I was namely interested in parts of the city that were either artificially created, such as Delta, Brajdica, the breakwater, where human intervention in nature was significant, or parts of the city such as Hartera and Mlaka that were fully urbanized. The humans displaced nature in these areas, initiated production processes and industry, and now, after several decades of these plants being unused, nature is slowly beginning to take over those spaces again.²³

The main motif of this art piece is the vegetation in the aforementioned entirely urban space. The plants that the author finds there are primarily weeds:

I was mainly interested in the concept of weeds; weeds as spontaneous plants that self-organizes, conquers space, and this kind of life dynamic that happens regardless of us humans. Many artists are now exploring nature in general, it is very current, and it is related to the concept of the Anthropocene, where we participate in the formation of geological formations of the earth, but on the other hand, we are extremely powerless because nature also acts on us.²⁴

²¹ Mitchell, “Introduction,” 2.

²² Interview with Igor Eškinja.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Weeds are the starting point of this art piece, but also the link to the industrial history of Rijeka and at the same time a commentary on our reality (Anthropocene). Playing with weeds-related connotations, that generally evoke a thought of unattractive, neglected and even worthless plants, Eškinja makes them visible and representative, finding in weeds a creative potential for the articulation of the entire concept, treating it as a subversive element. Starting from the idea of weeds Eškinja arrives to the main and final form of the piece, namely wallpapers. The artist chooses a medium from applied art inaugurated and popularized by William Morris in the 19th century. The design of Eškinja's patterns includes elements with a realistic representation of plants that refer to the typology of wallpaper from this period on one hand and, on the other hand, elements of abstract geometric shapes and basic colors that point to the aesthetics of high modernism. The artist opts for wallpapers mostly because they used to be an important and frequent interior decoration in the houses of many wealthy citizens of Rijeka in the 19th century when Rijeka obtained the reputation of an industrial city and port. The decorative motifs of these wallpapers derived from vegetation, but the representative one pointed to the wealth and well-being of the owners. The replacement of such plants with plain weeds in Eškinja's wallpapers indicates a deliberate intervention as, from the point of view of the industrial revolution and capitalism as well as according to the perspective of the society that looks at everything through profit, weeds are not something profitable and therefore not desirable. On the other hand, in science weeds do not exist, they are plants that have their value like any other, and the concept of weeds is revealed to be a construct. Moreover, according to Eškinja's statement, there is much more biodiversity in the areas he explores than in some natural environments. Although plants here are more fragile than those growing in natural conditions, the emptiness and desolation provide enormous potential for their growth. Despite working closely with biologists from the Natural History Museum in Rijeka, and despite striving to depict plants so that botanists can easily recognize them, Eškinja does not put himself in the position of scientist. Starting from the 'weeds logic', he creates a visual language in which he intervenes just slightly (just like weeds make micro-interventions in the space, they do not dominate it or occupy it completely). This language strongly corresponds to the real space, a feature present in other pieces by this artist. However, here Eškinja is interested mainly in the conceptual work level, according to which the "plants, with their content, create certain stories and relationships"²⁵.

Wallpapers

The piece was created during a two-year period, from 2018 to 2020. The first phase consisted in drawing plants. Eškinja visits the sites and observes how do the plants develop during the year or during each season. When selecting the plants, he

²⁵ Ibid.

relies on scientists. Reaching new knowledge in the field of biology and botany, new directions open in the creative process and in the elaboration of the main concept:

During my process, I contacted the Natural History Museum and I obtained great help from Željka Modrić Surina and Boštjan Surina, biologists, scientists. We visited together certain locations, we identified different plants and an entirely new area opened up in front of me, an area where this vegetation has its own growth dynamics and organized spreading which is very similar to the human one... There are plants that colonize, plants that are opportunists, plants that inhabit a space after some other plants, migrant plants [...] In shaping the art piece, in its conceptual creation, it was very important for me that this was a self-organized flora.²⁶

The work consists of six samples of wallpaper with a motif of plants extracted from each of the indicated sites. These six seemingly autonomous patterns are interconnected by the theme (weeds), medium (wallpaper) and rhythm. It was important for Eškinja that all these patterns are completely different and therefore he uses a special artistic-visual language for each of them. In doing so, he classifies the works into two groups: one consisting of those representing industrial premises and the other of those representing spaces of radical human intervention in the natural environment in the area of Rijeka.

In the group of wallpapers with plants found in spaces of former industrial complexes, the artist puts in relation the artistic language with the time of construction of these complexes. The artistic language on the wallpaper pattern that he generates from the area of the oldest industrial complex “Rikard Benčić”, the first one in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and created 50 or 60 years before any industry in this area, is composed of two colors: green and purple, connected by artificial light, ultraviolet rays, i.e., artificial conditions for the production of plants and food in the modern world. “Benčić” is an avant-garde location in the context of industrial production, and the visual counterpart alludes to the avant-garde modern production methods. The artistic elements of wallpaper patterns representing plants found in the area of the former factory “Hartera”, quite more recent than the “Rikard Benčić” complex, are built on principles of modernist art, such as flatness, basic colors and abstract or almost abstract, mostly regular shapes. The visual language of the work featuring a wallpaper pattern with plants from Mlaka and Industrijska street known for Rijeka’s valuable heritage of industrial and modernist architecture (Emigranti Hotel, Oil Refinery Administrative Building, Refinery’s Workers’ Village, torpedo factory launch pad, etc.) reminds of classic herbariums from the 19th century. It is made of irregular, organic, and scattered plant forms the silhouettes of which are ‘embodied’ by the industrial plants around which these plants grow. From a distance, the pattern is still

²⁶ Ibid.

perceived as an herbarium, whereas, as one approaches it, the scene reconfigures into the elements of industrial architecture.

In the second group of works, which consists of wallpaper patterns featuring a motif of plants selected from the area of Brajdica, Delta and the breakwater, contrast is the main compositional principle. Thus, in the wallpaper with the motif of plants from Brajdica, the graphical approach using regular shapes is confronted with the exotic peculiarity of the species it depicts. The Delta wallpaper pattern is dominated by a canopy, an element of a large plant or wild tree that does not exist in this location. As opposed to the others, the wallpaper with the pattern of plants from the Rijeka breakwater alludes to the night view and the water surface, like the abstract line of the breakwater immersed into the night and sea.

From each of the selected localities, the artist singles out plants according to a certain principle and arranges them in a wallpaper pattern in two basic ways: if the dominant visual element is natural, rhythm does not exist, but the elements are arranged following the principle of *horror vacui*, and if it is artificial (architecture, paper), the rhythm is distinct, strict, and repetitive. Thus, he transposes the shape and color of several plants growing on the site of the former “Rikard Benčić” factory (*Parietaria judaica*, *Sonchus asper*) into a purple and green visual language that simulates sunlight in artificial conditions. Man simulates nature by creating artificial conditions for real life. The choice of plants in this locality is very small because it is located in a very busy part of the city that is in constant use. The weeds here are extremely hardy and persistent as they survive in completely unnatural conditions. Nevertheless, they grow on their own and are the most present living matter in this locality. Even in the pattern, the plants are, therefore, arranged following the ‘logic of weeds’, i.e., without any order, rhythm, or repetition. On large and regular, green, and purple surfaces, plants emerge in different, precise, and recognizable shapes through several imprints in the same shades of purple, light purple and green, and in some places in neutral white (Figure 1).

The artist selected several plants (*Campanula pyramidalis*, *Satureja Variegata sub. Spec. Host*, *Broussonetia papyrifera*) from the area of the former Hartera paper mill and Školjić that are important in the local context because they grow only in this locality and nowhere else. He has combined them with highly stylized elements of architecture arranged in six areas of intense colors, such as red, blue, yellow, and green, and the achromatic colors white and black that he rhythmically repeats. He glues the plant silhouettes to the surface, thus breaking the symmetrical and strict composition. Weeds here indicate transience, the passage of time, seasons, repetitive cycles of birth, growth, and death, and change in general. The change is also being questioned at the level of the city and its identity, marked by industry and production facilities that once grew together with the city, which no longer exist nowadays. The rhythm is regular because the architectural elements are repeated, the shapes derived from a mathematical mind, unlike the wallpaper patterns where the dominant element is the plant, like in the previous example. Two of the plant species used are endemic. One of them can

be found only in this locality and serves as the food for only one species of bees in the world, and these bees feed only on it. The second one is a typical Adriatic plant named after the Rijeka scientist Nikola Host. It grows only in the area of Rijeka, in the canyon where the “Hartera” factory is located (Figure 2).

At the Mlaka site, the artist has chosen a wide range of different plants, the silhouettes of which he has filled with photographs of dilapidated and old industrial spaces. The plants ‘embody’ the dilapidated space; it fills their precisely cut silhouettes highlighted on a white background. In doing so, the artist plays with a simulation of an herbarium, which is what this pattern looks like viewed from a distance. As one gets closer, one does not see plants anymore but spaces. Since the irregular and organic plant forms build the composition, there is no rhythm or repetition like in the wall-paper patterns with the symmetrical architectural elements. The plants are arranged without any order and rules, following the unpredictability and freedom of weeds, like the pattern with plants from the “Rikard Benčić” site. One of the most famous species that the artist has found and presented here is mustard (*Brassica nigra*). (Also featured here are *Ambrosia artimisiiflora*, *Solanum nigrum*, *Capsella bursa-pastoris*, *Conyza canadensis*). (Figure 3).

At the backfilled Brajdica site, the artist has singled out exotic plants that came to this area by ship as weeds, after which they adapted and spread. By doing so, he wants to highlight the experience of the city in the international context and even the praised cosmopolitanism of Rijeka – these plants are the international inhabitants of the city. These are two plants from Asia (*Paulownia tormentosa*, *Platanus occidentalis*) and one plant from North America (*Phytolacca Americana*) whose exotic appearance Eškinja visually contrasts with simple, geometric, abstract, green, and white lines using a graphical approach. From a distance, the wallpaper pattern looks like an ‘abstract mess’, but as one gets closer, one can notice the plant forms that disrupt the ordered rhythm of the lines. There seems to be a rhythm, but there is no repetition, no pattern, no rules (Figure 4).

The Delta area is shown through parts of different species of large plants (*Prunus syriaca*, *Ailanthus alissima*, *Ficus carica*, *Paulownia tomentosa*) or trees that form an imaginary canopy in a place where nothing exists. This pattern consists of a composition of six photographs showing the shadows of the branches of various repeating wild trees. Each photograph is actually a photograph within a photograph: the shadows of the trees are shown on the panels, and the Delta area can be seen emerging from the background. The authentic location forms the frame of the panel, and altogether it looks like some (impossible) canopy in the Delta area. At the artistic level, the drawing that shapes the branches and the canopy dominates (a reference to Japanese woodcuts). The rhythm of the composition is pronounced due to the use of repetition. Since these are photographs on paper, an artificial element, the artist emphasizes the symmetry that is somewhat disturbed by the organic shape of the shadows of the trees. There are no threes in the Delta, so in this pattern, the artist presents the plant as a construct – or an idea. Precisely because of this, the Delta pattern most literally

depicts the title theme of landscape deconstruction. In addition, compared to other patterns, this is where the poetics of the composition is most pronounced (Figure 5).

The area of the Rijeka breakwater is characterized by high salinity and therefore very few plants. Eškinja has selected several different species (*Malva sylvestris*, *Sonchus asper*, *Tribulus terrestris*) here. He scans them by moving parts of the plant closer and further away from the scan panel. Thus, the parts touching the panel turn out sharp, and the other parts are blurred, while the artist also moves the plants, which ultimately gives the impression of spillage and is generally associated with water surfaces and their reflections. The plants are placed on a giant dark surface as if they were in the sea. The wallpaper is a black space from which the plants emerge. They are lavish in their molten forms and completely indistinct in some places. The artist emphasizes the organic, the irregular, and the natural. It stands in opposition to the abstract and symmetrical line of the breakwater, an artificial creation immersed in the sea (Figure 6).

Although Eškinja's installation deals with the plant world in an extremely urban space, at the same time, if not primarily, it also deals with the space itself. The areas chosen by Eškinja provide important traces of Rijeka's development in its recent history and are the main determinants of its identity as an industrial city and port, which, however, is no longer the case today. That is why these are also non-places,²⁷ like other abandoned and devastated Rijeka's industrial heritage: spaces devoid of identity, devoid of their original function and devoid of the fundamental role of the place as the space we build, and which builds us. It was also important for the artist that the very act of the first exhibition in Rijeka in 2020 further emphasized the theme of the work and therefore he carefully chose the exhibition site for the installation. He opted for the 'raw' environment of one of the halls of the former warehouse and wine cellar of Istravinaexport (IVEX) in Rijeka, which has been used for new purposes since the 1990s, and recently for exhibitions as well (in the same building there are studios of Rijeka-based artists, including Eškinja himself). Precisely because of the location of the former warehouse and industrial architecture, the installation is also a *site-specific* work that communicates directly with the space. Panels with six different wallpaper patterns are placed in the shape of the letter L so that they simultaneously hide and reveal some authentic elements, such as a reinforced concrete pillar, beam, or wall. The panels have an obverse and reverse. The reverse represents the empty surfaces referring to the walls of the building. As they are placed on wooden legs, they seem to float in space (Figure 7).

²⁷ Marc Augé, *Nemjesta: uvod u moguću antropologiju supermoderniteta* (Karlovac: Library of Psephism, 2001).

About the artist

Eškinja's²⁸ artistic work is thematically related to several units arising from his permanent interest in the perception of space and unconventional possibilities of image construction. He usually uses simple, ephemeral, and cheap materials, such as self-adhesive tape, dust and electric cables, to form a scene within a given space with extreme precision and mathematical accuracy. At the same time, the scene almost imperceptibly turns from a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional form, that is, it becomes an object or a situation.

The deconstruction of the image as a medium and its unconventional (re) construction are an integral part of Eškinja's artistic expression, which is directly or indirectly manifested in almost all his works, including the concerned installation: the choice of wallpaper and the concept of space. In the composition of the wallpaper, Eškinja is attracted by a mathematically symmetrical rhythm (repetition), which stems from the ambivalent character of the medium: on the one hand, in everyday context wallpaper usually represents decorative kitsch, and on the other, an everlasting image, which gets lost and becomes something undefined, functioning as a background or an ambience for one's living space. To emphasize the rhythm, the artist divides the wallpaper into pieces of equal size and shape that he arranges according to a made-up geometric principle, at the same time challenging this symmetry with the choice and composition of motifs: some wallpapers are completely filled, without any order or logic (*horror vacui*). Order and logic are something in which Eškinja recognizes an artificial element that stands in opposition to the organic natural form. This work emphasizes the contrast between strict, orderly compositions that allude to man and his mathematical, scientific, and instrumental mind on the one hand and irregular organic plant forms that overwhelm certain wallpaper patterns without any order or composition on the other. The dialectic of nature and culture is felt at all levels of the work. The material base represents space in itself, but the theme is also the space, which further emphasizes the choice of installation. We experience the space of the installation through movement, as well as the thematic spaces deconstructed and reconstructed by the plants in different compositions in wallpaper patterns.

The landscape is not the primary topic in this Eškinja's work; however, it is present as a part of the analytical process, which expounds and makes visible the artist's distinctive approach and method of work. In Eškinja's installation, the basic semantic message is manifested through the context, concept, and form of the work, and it is based on the weeds as an irrelevant, secondary, useless plant in which the artist sees a subversive element. At all levels of the work, the binary pair of nature and culture is strongly emphasized, their difference, but also their intertwining: here, nature is inconceivable without the urban.

²⁸ Igor Eškinja graduated in painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice in the class of Professor Carla Di Raca in 2002 and has participated in numerous residencies – ISCP in New York, MAC/VAL in Paris and Q21 in Vienna. He teaches at the Academy of Applied Arts, University of Rijeka. He uses numerous media in his work – from drawings, photography, and objects to spatial installations.

Conclusion

The installation *Do Plants Dream of the Future?* is based on the motif and symbolism of the plant world growing in the spaces of Rijeka's devastated port and industrial zone. The artist deliberates on the vitality and strength of the development process of these plants as a metaphor for the life and identity of the city of Rijeka. The starting point is industry and production facilities, once recognizable elements of Rijeka's identity, which are now decaying and disappearing. The installation primarily deals with 'non-places', but the basic artistic motif are the plants that grow there, in this text they are interpreted as landscape. The text aims to show a reinterpretation of this traditional theme in contemporary art: the landscape is deconstructed into the elemental – plants/weeds – and in this work it is completely conceptual: weeds emphasize life, its power, but also transience and in a simple and refined way reflect the complexity of the relationship between nature and culture. The awareness of the issue of this relationship is one of the important determinants that separates the contemporary landscape from the modernist and traditional one.

The landscape in the context of industrial plants and facilities is almost unimaginable. However, Igor Eškinja manages to make it recognizable and authentic, and at the same time dystopian and unreal, which is already indicated by the science-fiction title of the installation. Flirting with the modernist aesthetics, which it overcomes at the same time, the work meticulously decomposes space, ambience, environment as the thing within which we find – or lose – our own identity. Therefore, Eškinja's installation does not describe the landscape or what it means, but exactly what it *does*. The landscape here is deconstructed into a dynamic medium, i.e., a process that shapes social and subjective identities (questioning Rijeka's identity as an industrial port and possible formation of new identities that include care for and coexistence with nature). Hence, Eškinja's installation is not a concrete landscape in the sense of genre but is a landscape as a scene mediated by specific historical and geographical cultural determinants, i.e., as a medium of exchange between man and nature, comparable to Mitchell's analyses noted above.

List of figures with captions

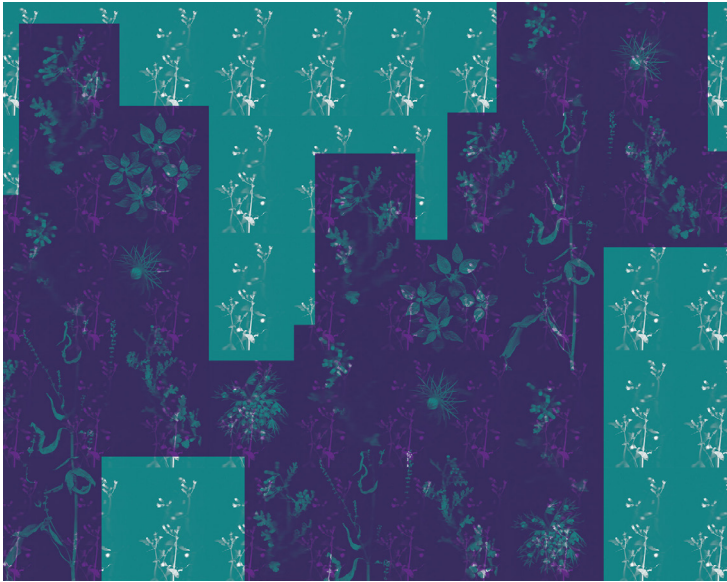


Figure 1: Igor Eškinja, *A pattern with plants from the site of the former "Rikard Benčič" factory*, 2020. Images courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2: Igor Eškinja, *A pattern with plants from the site of the former Hartera paper mill*, 2020. Images courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3: Igor Eškinja, *A pattern with plants at the Mlaka site*, 2020.
Images courtesy of the artist.

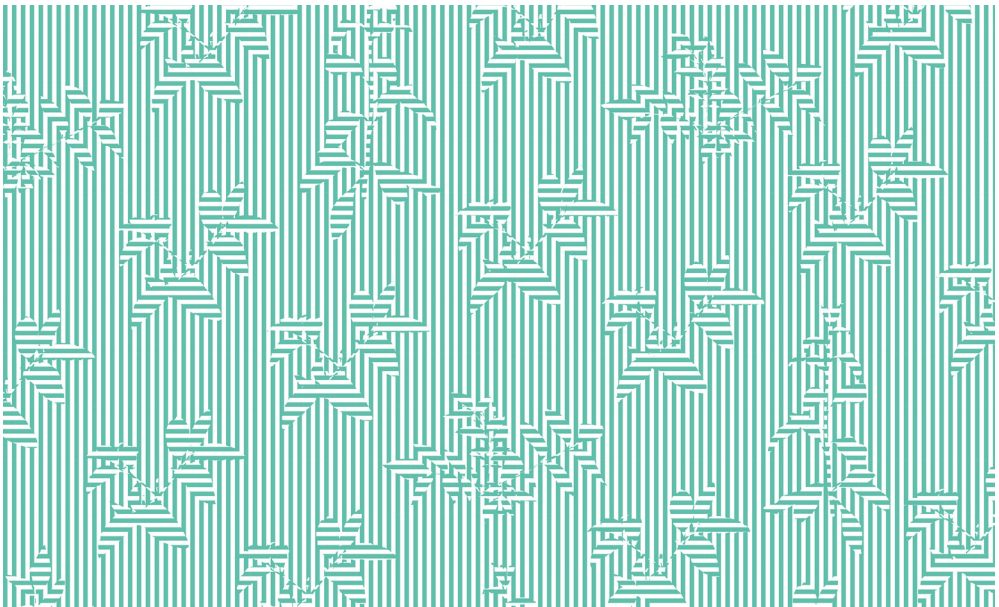


Figure 4: Igor Eškinja. *A pattern with plants at the Brajdice site*, 2020.
Images courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5: Igor Eškinja. *A pattern from the Delta site*, 2020. Images courtesy of the artist.

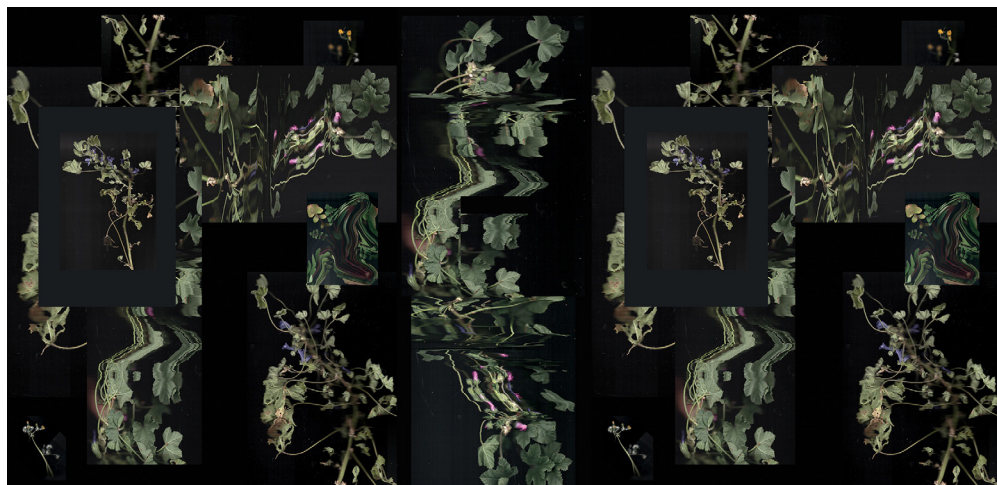


Figure 6: Igor Eškinja. *A pattern from the Lukobran site*, 2020. Images courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7: Igor Eškinja, *Installation in the DeltaLab (Delta 5) exhibition space in Rijeka, 2020*. Images courtesy of the artist.

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Article received: December 23, 2022

Article accepted: February 1, 2023

Review article