

MAPPING
MORAL MOTIVES
IN LAND ART

BY CLEMENS POOLE



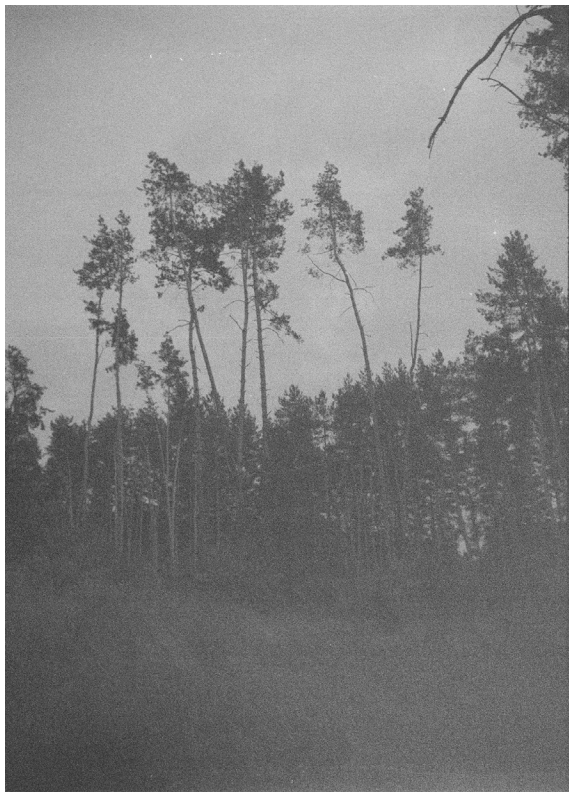
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In spring of 2020, as the pandemic set in around the world, IZOLYATSIA, Platform For Cultural Initiatives—where I was then employed as Curator at Large—had just launched its new three-year program ZAZEMLENNYA (Grounding), an exploration of art and culture practices in the age of the anthropocene. The program sought to help us zoom out and slow down, taking us into a space of deep time and Earth processes. These themes exist broadly in art practices, but their dimensions often elude the glitz and glam of pop culture consumption in our globalized civilization. This is increasingly true as we understand and express ourselves more and more via oily swipes across 12cm of hardened glass on our smartphones' screens. Rather

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than deep time, temporary virality has become the defining paradigm of our human moment. Rather than zooming out, we're Zooming in.

The pandemic, of course, accelerated these tendencies. As part of the physical world, we may have slowed down, but we also retreated deeper into the frame of mobile operating systems. ZAZEMLENNYA was forced to adapt away from the initial concept's hoped-for public programming and into weekly Zoom meetings. But, perhaps because the foundation's team itself was looking for a way to stay grounded, this slow down/speed up paradox became productive. We began to read and research widely about contemporary works that touch on the themes embedded in ZAZEMLENNYA. The Zoom meetings

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produced a democratized space for discussion where all members of the team—curators, project managers, SMM, interns—engaged collectively in compiling and analyzing relevant texts and works. The diversity of the works reflected the diversity of our team, and underpinned a fascinating exploration of the current state of contemporary art and its relationship to environmental concerns.

Assuming the role of de facto research coordinator, I set about systematizing these diverse materials into a structure that could provide a basis for prospective programming. From this process four tendencies organically emerged. IZOLYATSIA went on to use them for ZAZEMLENNYA as concrete thematic clusters with specific titles¹, but for the purposes of my work I began to refer to them as follows:

COEXISTENCE - *works that focus thematically on questions of humans sharing the inhabitable spaces of our planet with other life forms, flora and fauna.*

CONSUMPTION - *works that focus thematically on questions of human exploitation of the natural environment, both in order to sustain themselves and for frivolous purposes.*

RE-TERRAFORMING - *works that focus thematically on questions of repairing the Earth and the natural environment, predicated on an idea of pre-human circumstances.*

CREATION - *works that focus thematically on remaking the world by integrating human and natural factors to produce an as yet undiscovered state of harmony.*

These themes expressed themselves through evident groupings during the comparative assembly of numerous works, however many projects fell between or across more than one thematic group, displaying the interlinkages inherent to the open-ended art practices of today. One form of practice, however, that constantly occurred within this organizational structure, was the field of land art. Land art works appeared in all categories, and informed the analysis of other works in all categories.

As such, it seemed only natural, when arriving at Mohrytsia that summer, to apply some of this logical scheme to the works and practices I encountered. The structure, however, was not itself sufficient for understanding these tendencies. It required a deeper extrapolation,

and specifically an expansion of the underlying motives that pushed relevant works into this conceptual proximity with one another. I began to understand that the centrality of land art within the scheme exposed a kind of deep time relationship that humans have with their natural environment. This relationship, I argue, is essentially moral. Each of the four thematic tendencies excavated from our ZAZEMLENNYA research can be understood as an ethical signalling device that indicates a moral judgement about the human relationship with nature:



Figure 1. Moral symbol set.

COEXISTENCE - *in the extreme defined as the absence of mutual or unilateral infringement between the activities of humans and the natural world.*

CONSUMPTION - *in the extreme defined as full dominance, exploitation, and depletion of the natural world by human activities.*

RE-TERRAFORMING - *in the extreme defined as full erasure of human activity and its effects on the natural world.*

CREATION - *in the extreme defined as the transformation and synthesis of the natural world into a world fully marked by human creativity.*

I decided to map these tendencies in order to better illustrate their relationships to one another across a matrix of morality (see Figure 3). For the core symbols themselves, each pole is described by the interaction of two lines, envisioned as segments of an infinite linear movement from left to right. The lower line represents the natural world, while the upper line represents humanity (see Figure 2). When and how they converge dictates the character of each symbol. In *coexistence* the lines run impossibly parallel, never touching, while in *consumption* human activity descends and regresses into the lower line, cutting off all rightward motion for its own sustenance. In *creation* the natural world is elevated to one conscious plane with humanity, and in



Figure 2. Derivation of moral symbol set.





re-terraforming human activity is subsumed into the natural world (see Figure 1).

Each of these, as a moral position, cannot exist in the extreme, however, as poles on a matrix of morality, their directional magnetism can be detected in the artworks we encounter. The aspirational superconductivity of *coexistence*, for example, can direct our efforts towards sustainability, even if the absolute expression is unachievable. Similarly, full *consumption* leads to the destruction of all that sustains the human species, and yet many human activities tend towards it, both consciously and through negligence. *Re-terraforming*, as implemented by humans, contains the paradox of our own erasure, and yet visions of a world without humans

remain a creative staple. Lastly, *creation* rightly appears to be the most noble of the lot, but is also the most elusive. The negative tendrils of the various other poles consistently exert a magnetic pull, dragging works away from pure creation and towards the various human foibles that make up our less elevating activities.

As such, this map (Figure 3) requires a representation of the flux in which all these elements exist. The direction of this flux seems evident, from a moral standpoint. Each effort to move towards one extreme finds the artist pushed by unseen moral forces towards another, in an endless cycle of ethical compromise: The impossibility of achieving pure *creation* leads us to backtrack towards a restorative goal of corrective *re-terraforming*. The untenable self-

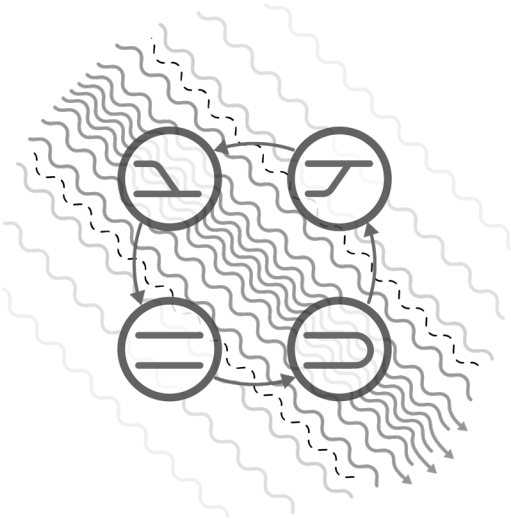


Figure 3. Matrix of morality.

obliteration of *re-terraforming* washes us towards a fantasy of pure and harmless *co-existence*. This dream then evaporates in the face of our own existential *consumption* of the world around us for sustenance. And finally, from there, we are compelled to shake off the crass debasement of defining ourselves purely as slaves to our physical needs, and move towards what we imagine to be a transcendent higher human calling—acts of pure artistic *creation*.

The cycle is further articulated by other forces represented in the matrix. Principly, all this activity experiences a moral pressure, represented by the metaphor of a river flowing down and to the right along a line defined by $y = -x$ (indicated by wavy directional arrows in Figure 3). Human necessity pushes us away

from morality (*re-terraforming* as the most morally concise answer to human inadequacy: human non-existence) and towards immoral acts (the negation of our environment in favor of self-sustaining urges as a species: global self destruction through unchecked *consumption*). Both these poles, in the middle, and also in the fastest currents, of the river of morality, are theoretically achievable, but untenable due to the ultimately obliterating pressure of the river's undertow. The phases between them, however, exist only on the shores of the impossible (indicated by dashed lines in Figure 3). We are drawn to them as moral ideals, but we know we can never achieve them beyond symbolic expressions in momentary works of art. Swimming upstream, towards the shore of

pure *creation*, we know that we too often miss the mark, failing to acknowledge the humanity expressed by our need for sustenance. Overcompensation in our paddling navigates us towards nonhuman constructs that nature has already perfected, essentially the act of *re-terraforming*. If we give up on the untenable self negation of *re-terraforming*, while also acknowledging our need to exist, we wash downstream, flirting with the mirage of pure self abnegation, shimmering on the impossible shore of *coexistence*. We then despair at the inaccessibility of this ideal and, depleted by our battle with the paradoxes of human morality and existentialism, drift with the current once again towards the abject decadence of pure *consumption* (this trajectory described by cyclic

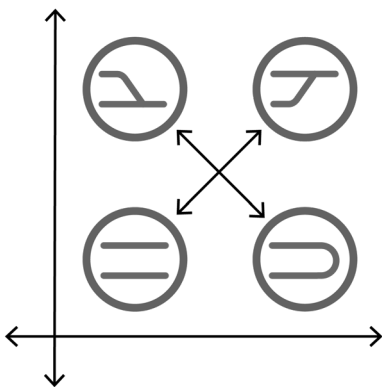


Figure 4. Directional attributes of the matrix of morality.

directional arrows in Figure 3).

The matrix, as illustrated, reveals additional qualities articulating directional motions across its field, as well as the implications of locating works at different, non-polar coordinates (see Figure 4). For instance, the y axis reveals notable organic (*co-existence* and *consumption*) vs inorganic (*creation* and *re-terraforming*) inflections. The x axis, on the other hand, has obvious passive (*re-terraforming* and *coexistence*) and active (*consumption* and *creation*) inflections. Similarly, diagonal movements represent unique characteristics in the river's flux. A diagonal represented by $y = x$ shows us the directions toward stagnation (*co-existence*) and change (*creation*), while a diagonal represented by $y = -x$ describes movements towards

deceleration (*re-terraforming*) and acceleration (*consumption*).

POST SCRIPTUM

At this point, an astute reader might note with some irony that this detailed description of a theoretical construct lacks one thing—grounding. Not a single specific work is cited in this essay as an example of the functionality of the proposed matrix, despite claims that the concept is anchored in extensive research into contemporary art practices with ZAZEMLENNYA, and raw interactive experimentation on location at Mohrytsia. This irony is not misplaced, however I propose to counter it with the assertion that examples need not be present for this construct to be useful as an intellectual tool for all who seek to analyze land art and other adjacent contemporary art practices. In fact, the pure abstraction of this thought process is essential to sustaining

its utility in open-ended applications. As with any theoretical tool, perhaps this invites unnecessarily severe misapplication by those too weak or personally inadequate to resist the authoritarian temptation of enforced morality. However, at the risk of becoming another fallen ideologist whose concept is eventually sullied by the ideological zeal of others, I maintain faith in the intellectual rigor and personal responsibility fostered by contemporary art practices.

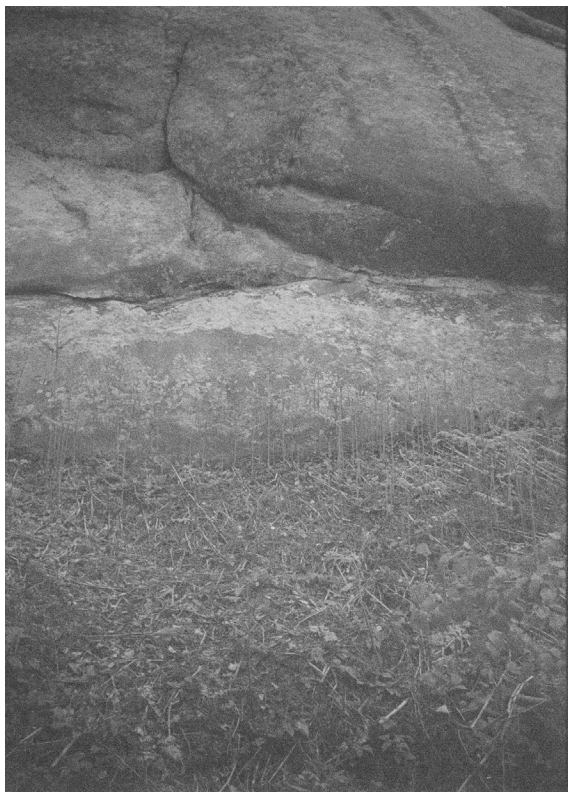
Ultimately, this theoretical exercise proposes that our works as humans and artists contain implicit moral assumptions about our relationship with the environment. In the case of land art this is particularly true because the materials of land art are so often symbolic of

our larger relationship with the Earth. The flux of our moral perturbations, as we throw ourselves against the bosom of our timeless Mother, is the product of what might be called a quadripolar disorder. We oscillate between our desires for the breast, for a return to the womb, for oedipal atrocities, and for transcendence. And through these thrashings, we produce art. At times it falls decisively towards one characterization or another, but at other times, unthinkingly, we simply respond to our nature, be it weakness, stupidity, strength, or genius. In all cases, however, a greater understanding is possible if we admit to the moral assumptions that undergird our creative acts. This does not demand that creativity be a noble act—it simply demands that it be an honest one.

NOTES

¹. IZOLYATSLA's program now uses specific vocabulary, developed just before my departure from the foundation in June 2020. The terms used here are my own.

². All biological life, subject to consumption needs similar to human life, is untenable on further extrapolation. Thus, fully re-terraforming would lead to a barren planet.



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