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Landscape Now

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Cover image: David Alesworth, *Unter den Linden*, 2010, horticultural intervention, public art project, terminalia arjuna seeds (sterilized) yellow paint.. Digital image courtesy of David Alesworth.

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Contents

1973 and the Future of Landscape, Nicholas Alfrey



1973 and the Future of Landscape

Nicholas Alfrey

Abstract

This essay is an exercise in exhibition history, focused on Landscape in Britain, c.1750–1850 held at the Tate Gallery in the winter of 1973, in which curators Conal Shields and Leslie Parris set out to question received ideas about the rise of landscape painting in Britain, and to widen the range of materials for investigation. Drawing on correspondence and the designer's plans in the Tate Archives, aspects of the concept, installation, reception, and legacy of the exhibition are considered. The exhibition is seen in the context of a wider reappraisal of landscape as a field of study, but also in relation to the renewal of landscape as an arena for contemporary art practice. The discussion is bracketed by that of two further exhibitions, Constable: The Art of Nature at the Tate in 1971 and an ambitious sequel in 1983, in which a survey of the next one hundred years of landscape art in Britain was attempted.

Authors

Acknowledgements

Stephen Daniels has made a significant contribution to this essay. The experience of the Tate exhibition in 1973 has had a lasting effect on us both, and it was initially his suggestion that it would make an appropriate subject for the *Landscape Now* conference, from which this essay has been developed. Special thanks are due also to Joy Sleeman and Ben Tufnell, to Chris Bastock at the Tate Library and Archive, and to Imogen Maxwell at the Hayward Gallery Art Library.

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Although exhibition history has become a burgeoning field in art-historical studies in recent years, exhibitions dealing with the theme of landscape have received relatively little attention. There has been a tendency to privilege “landmark exhibitions”, carrying with it a risk of distorting the broader picture, to say nothing of its corollary, the aggrandizing of the curator as cultural producer.¹ But there is a case to be made for the exhibition *Landscape in Britain, c.1750–1850*, held at the Tate Gallery in 1973, as particularly significant. “It opened up the issue of landscape art in this period as a complicated form of knowledge”, as Stephen Daniels has noted, and in so doing made innovative use of the exhibition format as a vehicle for questioning received assumptions and proposing new connections.²

Landscape in Britain, c.1750–1850, which opened at the Tate Gallery on 20 November 1973 and ran until 3 February 1974, was conceived as the third in a series of winter exhibitions at the Tate Gallery, following surveys of Elizabethan and Jacobean painting and the age of Charles I; it also served to set the scene for the imminent bicentenary celebrations of Turner and Constable.³ The exhibition was a collaboration between two curators, Leslie Parris, Assistant Keeper at the Tate Gallery, and Conal Shields of the Camberwell School of Art. In the opening lines of his catalogue introduction, Shields set out their position: that the rise of landscape painting in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a remarkable phenomenon “for which, so far, no convincing account can be given”.⁴ To redress this, they sought to show the countryside as an arena of social and economic change, and to demonstrate how new imagery, processes, and techniques for landscape emerged in this period. They also sought to indicate the conditions of the art world with which this new landscape art had to contend.

There were a number of precedents for this reappraisal of landscape. In academic enquiry, John Barrell’s study of John Clare, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* had appeared in 1972, taking the years 1730 to 1840 as its field of investigation.⁵ In broadcasting, *Ways of Seeing*, written by John Berger with Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Jean Mohr, and Richard Hollis and directed by Michael Dibb, first shown in January 1972, offered a provocative interpretation of Gainsborough’s *Mr and Mrs Andrews*.⁶ In exhibition-making, *A Decade of English Naturalism 1810–1820* had been curated by John Gage for the Norwich Castle Museum in 1969, and shown in the following year at the V&A. It was described by Peter Lasko in his Preface to the catalogue as “a kind of lecture illustrated by original works of art instead of slides”, bringing out the strongly didactic character of the project.⁷ A diagram of Cornelius Varley’s Graphic Telescope, patented in 1811, appeared on the cover of the catalogue, signalling the exhibition’s concern with new ways of looking, with new apparatus.

The Art of Nature

One exhibition in particular can be seen as a rehearsal for *Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850. Constable: The Art of Nature*, also curated by Parris and Shields, had been planned for the Aldeburgh Festival, and was adopted by the Tate Gallery only after an adverse police report on the security of the original venue.⁸ It is interesting to note, though, that this further initiative to reconsider the terms of landscape also came out of East Anglia. The exhibition ran for just under a month, opening at the Tate in early June 1971.

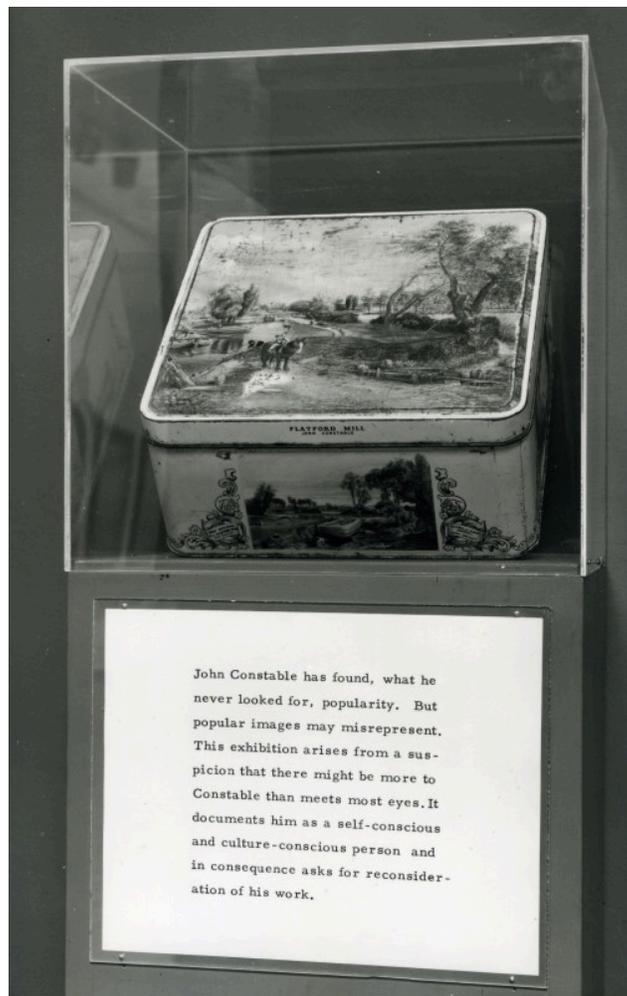


Figure 1.

Installation photograph showing the introductory display and text to the exhibition "Constable: The Art of Nature" at the Tate Gallery, 1971, photograph. Tate Photographic Archive Collection (Tate Exhibitions and Displays List No 11, 8). Digital image courtesy of Tate.

The opening line of the first section of the catalogue sets the tone: “The English countryside, commonly seen (at least by historians of landscape painting) as a place of eternal calm and contentment, in Constable’s day underwent considerable change.”⁹ And at the entrance to the exhibition itself, the campaign was opened up on another front: beneath the display of a biscuit tin, garishly decorated with reproductions of *Flatford Mill* (*Scene on a Navigable River*), *Boat-Building near Flatford Mill* and other images of Constable Country (Fig. 1), a text declared: “John Constable has found, what he never looked for, popularity. But popular images may misrepresent. This exhibition arises from a suspicion that there may be more to Constable than meets most eyes.”¹⁰ The exhibition included works from a number of public and private collections, but fully half of the 115 items came from the Constable family archive, lent by Colonel John H. Constable, the artist’s great grandson, and his wife. The Constable family loans included three oil paintings, one watercolour, and three drawings: the rest was made up of archive materials, including letters, manuscripts, and volumes from the artist’s library. The exhibition was therefore as much a display of documents—letters, notes, diagrams, published books, and also studio apparatus—as it was a conventional showing of paintings, drawings and prints. It was, as Colonel Constable expressed in a letter to the gallery’s director Norman Reid, “as was intended, a conversation between books, letters and pictures”.¹¹ The extensive use of black and white photographic reproductions of Constable’s paintings for comparative purposes in the display must have further served to blur the distinction between art and documentation. This was an exhibition in which processes and ideas counted for as much as the works of art themselves.

The catalogue, designed by Iain Bain and admirably succinct, was an indispensable aid to navigating the exhibition (most exhibits were accompanied by a number only, and there were few captions). The exhibits were divided into seven sections dealing with the art world, including copying and collecting, art theory, poetry, science, studio practice, and apparatus, the relationship between art and nature, and Constable’s activities as printmaker and lecturer. There was, inevitably, some degree of separation between this textual and didactic framing and the actual work on display. Almost half the exhibits related to the section on art and nature, and from the list of works shown it is difficult to see how the opening section on the art world could have made good on the curators’ claim to “indicate the complications of country life during the first half of the nineteenth century”.¹² Overall, though, the exhibition adhered convincingly to the aim, as set out by Parris in his letter to lenders: “to examine the habitual idea of Constable as a ‘natural painter’ and to suggest the limitations of this view”.¹³

Constable: The Art of Nature drew on R.B. Beckett's edition of Constable's correspondence to build up its picture of "a self-conscious and culture-conscious" artist as opposed to the uncomplicated nature lover of popular imagination.¹⁴ Beckett had died the previous December, but Parris and Shields had access to the materials he had gathered, and were able to include some of the items he had used in their display. But for all its substance, their exhibition was conducted on a relatively modest scale and could easily be overlooked.

Landscape in Britain c.1750–1850

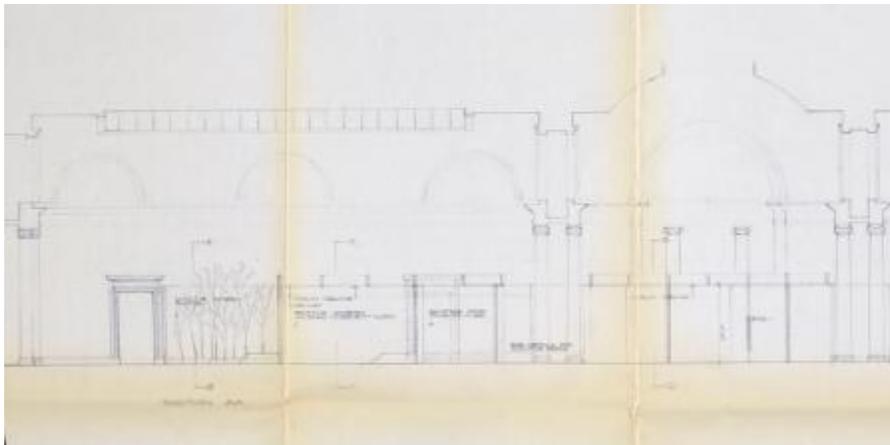
The Tate Gallery's winter exhibition for 1973, however, was planned on an altogether more ambitious scale. It gave the same curators the opportunity to open out from a monographic focus and to develop their ideas into a wide-ranging investigation into the practices of landscape extending across several generations. Their new exhibition was informed by the same distinctive strategy as before, based on the proposition that landscape painting could only be understood in terms of an expanded field of ideas, processes, and mediums. Parris and Shields brought out complex, shifting relationships between images and texts, painting and printmaking, artists and their market, and between observation, fieldwork, and theory.

Works by sixty-three artists were included, with almost twenty more in a retrospective section on Old Masters and landscape artists working in Britain before the mid-eighteenth century. The selection gave undeniable prominence to oil painting, but watercolour and engraving were both strongly represented. There were sections on "Antiquities, Travel and the Picturesque" and "The Literature of Landscape" which emphasised the significance of texts and documents of various kinds, and not just as "background", and another on optical instruments, from the Claude glass to the Calotype camera. Two further sections focused on specific sites, the designed landscapes of Stourhead and Hafod.

In order to bring all this disparate material together, the curators had to stretch the conventions of exhibition-making, at least as regards exhibitions of historical art, and to test the limit of what could be done in this format, that is, with the display of a set of physical objects. This presented a particular challenge to the exhibition's designer, Christopher Dean of Castle Park Dean and Hook Architects.

The space allocated was the full extent of the Duveen Galleries, at this period the Tate Gallery's main space for temporary exhibitions. The intimidating classical grandeur of the architecture, originally designed for sculpture, was largely concealed by an elaborate temporary construction, with changes of level, ramps, platforms, and steps (Fig. 2).¹⁵ The exhibition

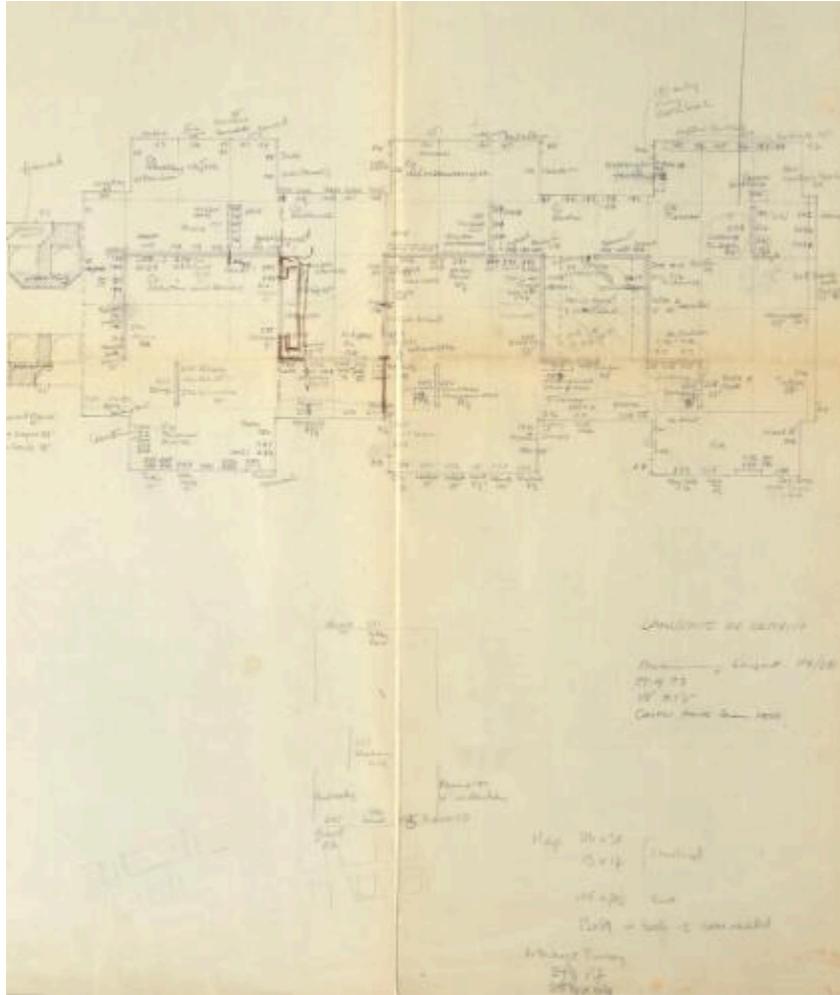
spaces were covered over by a muslin ceiling at a height of about 15 feet, keeping the austere barrel vault overhead out of sight. The designer created an ingenious warren of spaces of various sizes, with partitions, panels, free-standing screens, showcases, and cabinets to accommodate the exhibits (321 in all), with their challenging diversity of scale and medium, and the often conflicting requirements of display and lighting conditions (Fig 3). All this necessitated the creation of an extraordinarily complex environment, but it did not please everyone: “Such a meaningless intricacy of ugly little spaces” one lender wrote testily to the gallery’s Director, though admittedly he was exasperated because the work his institution had agreed to lend had been damaged by a visitor.¹⁶ Edward Lucie-Smith complained in a broadcast discussion on BBC Radio 3 that he found something “disturbingly contemptuous about the display”, particularly in the opening retrospect section where the design was at its most intricate, adding that he thought no great work of art should be shown just for its documentary interest.¹⁷ He went on to concede, however, that in the later sections “there’s been a great deal of thinking going on”.



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 2.

Christopher Dean, Design drawing for the exhibition “Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850”, detail of sheet 101 showing left hand side elevation, 1973, drawing. Tate Photographic Archive Collection (TG 92/265/ Box 4). Digital image courtesy of Tate.



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 3.

Christopher Dean, Design drawing for the exhibition “Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850”, detail of sheet 119/05 showing location of all the exhibits, 1973, drawing. Tate Photographic Archive Collection (TG 92/265/ Box 4). Digital image courtesy of Tate.

The lighting, too, was the subject of some visitors’ complaints: too dark to see properly, said one correspondent, while Denys Sutton, reviewing the show, complained about too much light, casting shadows on some pictures, obscuring others in the glare. ¹⁸ But the organisers were facing unforeseen difficulties: the exhibition opened at a time of a mounting fuel crisis, and national restrictions on energy consumption had been introduced. In a letter, Ruth Rattenbury, Assistant Keeper in the Department of Exhibitions and Education, observed that despite curtailing the opening hours, “the cuts in electricity we have made were still not sufficient to conform to current regulations”. ¹⁹ The exhibition was throwing out too much light, in times that were literally getting darker—in December, the three-day working week had been announced, together with a programme of power cuts. ²⁰

These technical and organisational problems did little to compromise the effectiveness of the exhibition, as many of those who saw it would attest. Commenting on the influence of the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, Stephen Daniels has observed that it “remains a landmark event and text, a source which fed a new stream in the social history of the landscape arts, enriching the field of enquiry with materials and questions which still remain to be fully examined.”²¹ It made apparent how little this most revered genre had been understood, and how much more was still to be done.

Here my account will inevitably be inflected by personal memories. The exhibition made a vivid impression on repeated visits during the Christmas vacation of 1973: looking back on it now, it feels like the beginning of a journey. All the same, to look at the installation photographs in the Tate archive is a disconcerting experience.²² They brought back no memories of my visits: it was almost as if I was looking at the record of another exhibition entirely. I certainly don't remember the trees, but there they are in the photographs, and they were clearly an integral part of the designer's concept, carefully placed around the entrance and again at the halfway point, around the Duveen Gallery's octagon (Fig. 4). The trees had been requested from the Parks Depot at Regents Park “to help create an appropriate atmosphere”, and were looked after for the duration of the exhibition by the Tate Gallery's part-time gardener.²³ There were about thirty in all, some of considerable height; they were evidently broad-leaved evergreens, but seen in the photographs, they strike a wintry note, a tracery of naked branches or a spray of dark leaves silhouetted against the painted landscapes, mostly representations of other seasons (Fig. 5).



Figure 4.

Landscape in Britain c.1750-1850, installation photograph, 1973. Tate Photographic Archive Collection (TG 92/265/ Box 4). Digital image courtesy of Tate.



Figure 5.

Landscape in Britain c.1750-1850, installation photograph, 1973. Tate Photographic Archive Collection (TG 92/265/ Box 4). Digital image courtesy of Tate.

These photographs underline one of the difficulties encountered in the study of exhibition history. Installation photographs provide crucial evidence of how exhibitions looked, but the camera has a tendency to fix precisely those things that are fairly marginal to a visitor's experience—the gaps between exhibits, incidental clutter, the dated fads of exhibition design (Fig. 6). This gives little sense of an exhibition's capacity to transform perception through the juxtaposition of the familiar with the overlooked, or to suggest new relationships between works of art, or between works of art, objects, and texts. The efficacy of *Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850* lay in its capacity to set up these kinds of dynamic exchanges. The diagrams of the layout are particularly valuable here. They provide a more effective way of seeing how these relationships in space were set up. Even so, the full extent of the interplay between works of art, texts, and documents is not apparent from the layout diagrams.



Figure 6.

Landscape in Britain c.1750-1850, installation photograph, 1973. Tate Photographic Archive Collection (TG 92/265/ Box 4). Digital image courtesy of Tate.

There is another reason why the primary experience of the exhibition is so difficult to recover. The catalogue, exemplary in its own way, was an essential accompaniment to it, and in the years since then has remained an indispensable contribution to the literature of landscape.²⁴ The effect has been to fold the publication over the exhibition itself, while the intersection of sensory, spatial, and intellectual stimuli that made it so work as a transformative experience becomes gradually lost to memory.

Some critics quibbled about the selection of artists—Richard Parkes Bonington's absence in particular was noted, an objection that seems to take no account of the curators' stated intention to only show works done in this country, with a few exceptions (the basis of those exceptions was admittedly rather ambiguously defined). The inclusion of so many unfamiliar names was also widely commented on. If one image was given currency by the exhibition more than any other, it was surely George Robert Lewis' *Hereford, Dynedon and Malvern Hills from the Haywood Lodge, Harvest Scene, Afternoon* (Fig. 7). It was positioned in the same space as work by Constable and John Linnell, along with small oils painted directly from nature by William Delamotte, William Havell, and others. A detail with the group of figures was reproduced on the poster and featured on the cover of the catalogue, and it illustrated several of the broadsheet reviews (Fig. 8). The painting had been

in the Tate Gallery's collection since 1904 but only at that moment seems to have come into its own: a picture of harvesting in the summer of 1815 became an icon for Britain in the winter of 1973.



Figure 7.

George Robert Lewis, Hereford, Dynedor and Malvern Hills from the Haywood Lodge, Harvest Scene, Afternoon (detail), 1815, oil on canvas, 41.6 × 59.7 cm. Collection of Tate (N02961). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 Unported).

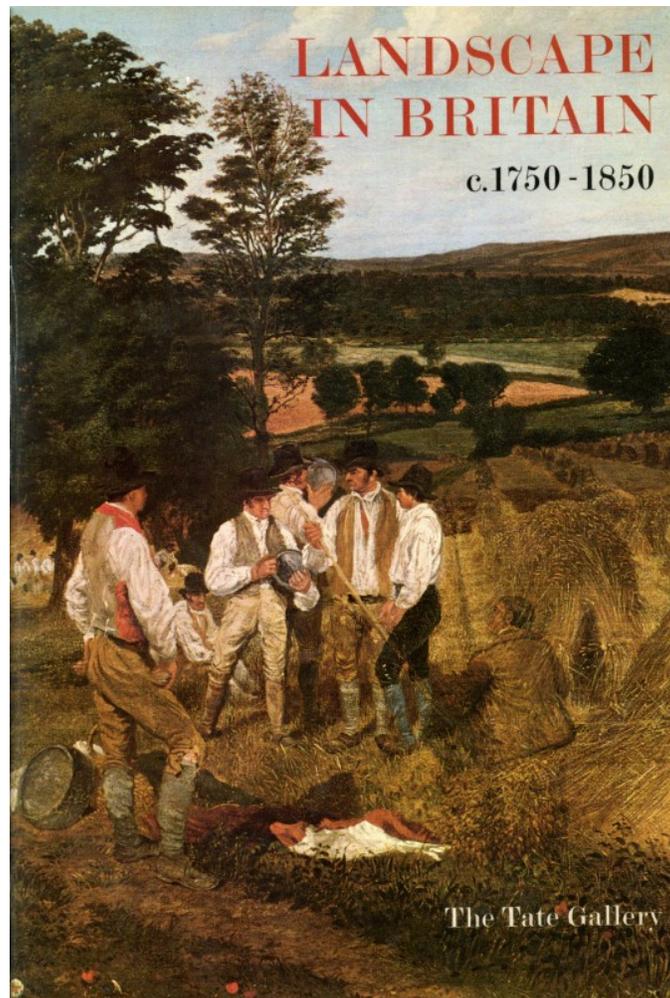


Figure 8.

Landscape in Britain c.1750-1850, cover of exhibition catalogue (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1973). Digital image courtesy of Tate.

As Christiana Payne has noted, Lewis may have made alterations to his figures before exhibiting the picture in 1816—a year of unrest in the countryside—in order to avoid any suggestion of confrontation between the group of harvesters and the seated figure of the bailiff or overseer, the latter now seen ghosting back through the painted surface.²⁵ In his catalogue entry, Parris made no reference to these turbulent circumstances, and that interpretation would presumably not be available to an exhibition visitor. But in the winter of 1973-1974, this image of harvesters in the Herefordshire countryside can only have seemed reassuring by comparison with the grim economic realities and political uncertainty of the present, with the three-day week beginning and a looming wave of strikes.²⁶

The New Art of Landscape

There is another context in which some of the curatorial strategies evident in the conception and presentation of *Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850* might be thought about: the renewal of landscape painting in the field of contemporary art.²⁷ These strategies included an emphasis on process as well as on the production of a finished work of art, an acknowledgement of the close relationship between text and image in the making and understanding of landscape, an interest in the interdependence of document and artwork, and above all an awareness of the limits of purely optical experience. In the previous year, Lawrence Gowing had coined the phrase “the visible meaning of a good picture” in an indignant refutation of John Berger’s analysis of Gainsborough’s *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, a phrase duly incorporated by Berger in the book version of *Ways of Seeing* as a way of turning the argument back against him.²⁸ The curators of *Landscape in Britain* showed themselves to be similarly sceptical about the idea that meaning in a picture could be so transparent. Their central business remained the making of landscape pictures, but they were fully attentive to the chain of transactions that had to take place between the outdoor experience and the final destination of a work, whether that was the exhibition room or the printed page.

In contemporary art, landscape painting might well have seemed a redundant genre by the late 1960s and early 1970s. But a young generation of artists was increasingly turning to landscape, if not to painting. Some of the results were seen at *The New Art* at the Hayward Gallery in 1972—the year before *Landscape in Britain*. This is generally reckoned as the first exhibition of Conceptual Art in London on a large scale in a public gallery, but a surprising number of the artists involved, including Richard Long, Gilbert and George, and Hamish Fulton were engaged with landscape in one form or another.²⁹ These artists turned to landscape not in order to reclaim territory lost to traditionalists but because it offered an expanded field in which to work: a way of getting away from the constraints of the studio, formalist criticism, and the commodification of the art object. In doing so they were adopting new processes, mediums, tools, and frameworks, and if they seemed to acknowledge the idea that landscape might be a recurring concern in British art, they also showed a determination to interrogate that tradition critically.

The Tate Gallery had itself given a platform to this new art. *Seven Exhibitions*, a series of seven brief sequential solo shows held early in 1972, set out to show “the scope of the crystallising Conceptual and performance art”, anticipating the Arts Council’s *The New Art* by several months.³⁰ Landscape was included in the sequence through the participation of Hamish

Fulton; the intention was not to suggest the continuity of the traditional category but a radical extension of it, a questioning of what it might mean now to make art out of doors. Of course it is hardly to be expected that this kind of manifestation would appeal to the same audience as were attracted to the Tate Gallery's strand of historical landscape exhibitions: in the years leading up to *Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850*, the gallery had presented exhibitions of John Crome; *The Shock of Recognition*, on the relationship between Dutch and British landscape painting; Constable (the small exhibition discussed above); and Caspar David Friedrich.³¹ The new art of landscape, not yet quite settled under the contested label of Land art, and these shows of historical landscape painting were addressed to different constituencies: there can have been very little overlapping of their audiences. In retrospect, however, *Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850* can be seen as repositioning landscape as a field of study, just as it was being revalidated in contemporary art practice. In both fields of activity, new questions were being posed, and new methods adopted.

In 1973, though, the past and present of landscape were not likely to be understood as being interconnected. We can infer this from a lengthy review by Tim Hilton of *Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850* in *Studio International*, then in its most innovative phase and regularly giving space to new forms of landscape art. Hilton was entirely blind to the radical agenda of the Tate's exhibition: for him British landscape was, by definition, a zone of no conceivable relevance.³² He derided the efforts of "a whole sizzling New Generation of watercolour scholars" (meaning Shields and Parris, as well as John Gage), poured scorn on Shield's contention that the rise of landscape painting in Britain is "amongst the most remarkable episodes of cultural history", and asserted that landscape in England was "deprived of the muscle of intellectual content". He objected to the curators' use of texts ("pictures are not made out of words"), and declared that unlike Romantic poetry, landscape painting was "nowhere on the thoughtful side". Hilton, perversely iconoclastic, ends up taking the same view as Denys Sutton, another reviewer who dismissed British landscape as provincial, and who concluded that the Tate Gallery's exhibition "raises questions as to whether the English are such masters of landscape as is usually stated."³³

It is disappointing that such a review should have appeared in *Studio International*, a journal so open to developments in landscape, and which two years earlier had produced an issue that doubled as the catalogue for Charles Harrison's exhibition *The British Avant-Garde*, with a landscape image on the cover, an arrangement of stones by Richard Long on a slope beneath a crag on Skye.³⁴ Shields and Parris were too much the scrupulous historians to misuse the term "avant-garde" to describe what was happening in landscape, even towards the end of their period. Perhaps it was inevitable that there was no dialogue between landscape historians and advocates of

the new landscape practices. But the Tate Gallery exhibition addressed the issue of landscape in new ways, and if the innovative strategies it deployed were lost on some critics, it made a vital contribution to a renewal of interest in landscape in the early 1970s, whether in the making or in the search for meaning.

After the Golden Age: 1983

The time-frame of *Landscape in Britain, c.1750–1850* covered what could be conventionally taken as a “golden age” of landscape in this country, from Richard Wilson to the death of Turner, though the organisers felt no need to resort to any such concept. In practice, they extended their period through the 1850s to encompass the Pre-Raphaelites: they included William Dyce’s *Pegwell Bay, Kent—A Recollection of October 5th 1858*, painted in 1859–1860, and Rosa Brett’s small panel of a turnip field from a private collection was dated “after 1863”. (As Parris wrote in a letter of thanks to its lender, the Brett “as you may have noted from the press, made an impression out of all proportion to its size”).³⁵ The year 1973 was also the year in which Allen Staley’s ground-breaking monograph *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* appeared: there would have been no consensus that the Pre-Raphaelites were part of the golden age of British landscape even a few years previously.³⁶ But if the curators did not trade on the myth of a golden age, the 1850 cut-off point served, even if inadvertently, to reinforce the idea that after this date landscape would no longer have the same significance in British art, and that a vital episode in the culture was over. The implication is that the history of landscape art over the next one hundred years is an altogether less compelling subject, one for which a coherent critical framework would be difficult to devise.

As if in response to this implied challenge, a sequel was attempted ten years later. *Landscape in Britain 1850–1950* was developed by a different organization, the Arts Council, with two new curators, Frances Spalding and Ian Jeffrey. It had originally been conceived as a touring exhibition, drawing attention to the depth and unfamiliarity of regional collections, and was only scheduled for the Hayward Gallery when an unexpected gap opened up in the programme. The exhibition was put together in just twelve months, and opened in February 1983 at the Hayward Gallery, before touring to Bristol, Stoke-on-Trent, and Sheffield.

The exhibition picked up from where its predecessor had left off, now defined as the end of an era, the passing of Romanticism, marked by the deaths of Wordsworth in 1850 and Turner in 1851. Its opening section was somewhat hobbled by the fact that the 1973 exhibition extended beyond the notional 1850 end point to include some of the key works of Pre-Raphaelite landscape, as noted above. One consequence of this was that the Tate

Gallery refused to lend major pictures such as Dyce's *Pegwell Bay*—its absence was widely regretted in the critical coverage of the new survey.³⁷ Indeed, a prevailing view among critics was that the selectors had been unable, in many cases, to get the loans they wanted, and had to settle for second best.

The model established in 1973 was followed by the selectors to a point, in their highlighting unfamiliar names and reputations, and in acknowledging that painting was not the only medium for the art of landscape. Again, oil paintings constituted the majority of exhibits, but photographs, posters, designs for book jackets, and illustrations were also included, pointing to the fact that there was now a popular and commercial culture around landscape to be taken into consideration, as well as the traditional modes of watercolour and printmaking. There had been two photographs by Fox Talbot in the 1973 exhibition, together with items of the equipment he used. Photography had become ever more central to the representation of landscape in the next hundred years, and while the work of a number of photographers from the Victorian period was included, the medium was given only a token presence in the coverage of the first half of the twentieth century—an indication of the difficulty of finding suitable criteria for selection in what was now an unmanageably huge mass of potential examples. The earlier exhibition had found effective ways to suggest how landscape imagery migrated across media, from drawing to print, from poetry to painting, from landscaping and “improvement” on the ground to pictures for public exhibition and private consumption. But for the period 1850–1950, the scale and pace of these sorts of migration, the proliferation of new mediums, technologies, circuits, and markets made for a field which was now very difficult to navigate.

Landscape in Britain 1850–1950 was a remarkable enterprise in its way, particularly as regards the unprejudiced attitude that informed the selectors' choices (so Alfred Munnings and Rowland Hilder, as well as Spencer Gore and Peter Lanyon), and their reluctance to accept the idea of a “modern tradition” as an adequate way of framing landscape practices after 1850. In an interview, Ian Jeffrey said that they had aimed to represent the full range of what was going on in landscape in the period, to include things because they were popular as well as art of the highest quality.³⁸ In pursuit of this objective, they brought a bewildering wealth of new material to light, but declined any attempt to forge it into a coherent overall narrative.

The Hayward Gallery had not hitherto been associated with historical exhibitions of British landscape, and its assertive, brutalist architecture was not the most obvious setting for a display of the genre.³⁹ *Landscape in Britain 1850–1950* was installed in the galleries on the lower levels (there were two further exhibitions upstairs). In his review for *The Observer*, William

Feaver, invoking the vocabulary of the Picturesque, likened the spaces to “grotts and caverns shagged with horrid shades”, accentuating the contrast of galleries where daylight never penetrates with the display of so much work devoted to “memories of the open air”.⁴⁰ In practice, the pictures were shown against white walls, and widely spaced—a conservative hang apparently designed to offset any suggestion of medley (Fig. 9). The railway and London transport posters, book jackets, and illustrations were mostly grouped together at the end, reiterating a distinction between the fine arts and the wider visual culture of landscape which seems at odds with the curatorial intention (Fig. 10).



Figure 9.

Landscape in Britain, 1850-1950, 1983, installation photograph, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre. Digital image courtesy of Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre | Photo: John Webb.

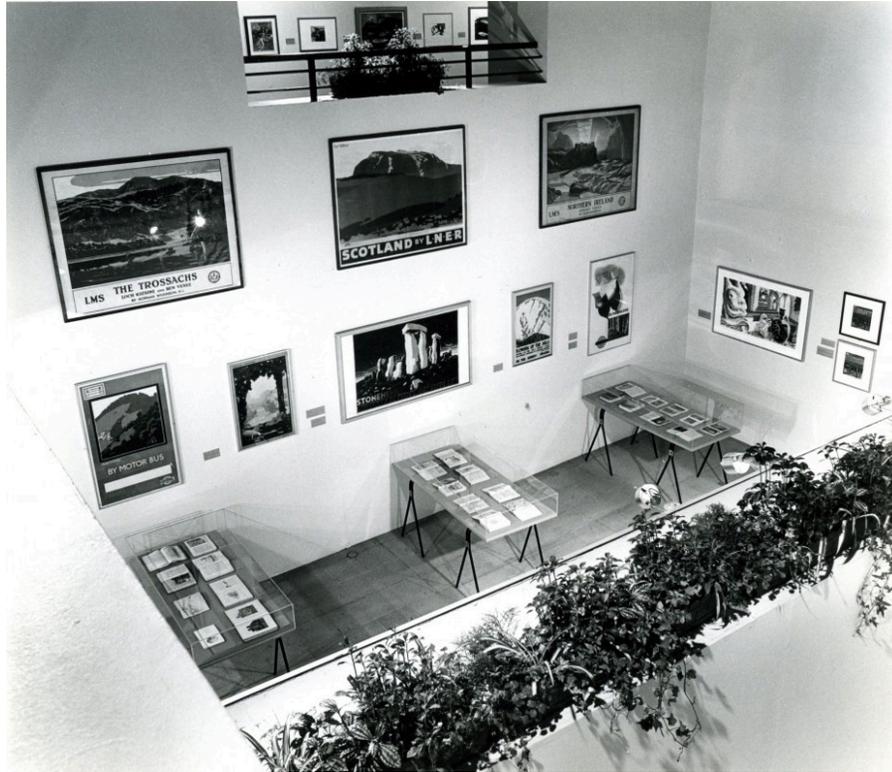


Figure 10.

Landscape in Britain, 1850-1950, 1983, installation photograph, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre. Digital image courtesy of Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre | Photo: John Webb.

The exhibition had extensive press coverage, due to its platform at the Hayward Gallery, but critical response was divided. Peter Fuller, recalling the Tate Gallery show of a decade earlier, thought the new survey chronicled the faltering of a once confident vision of landscape, showing “its transformation, fragmentation and finally its disintegration”, while John McEwen, in a piece for *The Spectator* tersely headed “Downhill”, wrote it off as “a melancholy story of decline”, an indiscriminating spectacle aiming at mere popular approval.⁴¹ The idea that the real appeal of the exhibition would be to lovers of nature and the countryside had considerable currency, and was noted sometimes in positive terms. William Packer in *The Financial Times* described it as “somewhat lightweight, refreshingly un-academic and thoroughly enjoyable”, while Michael Shepherd for *The Sunday Telegraph* thought it “one of the most beautiful, undemanding and thoroughly national exhibitions” ever to have been seen at the Hayward Gallery.⁴² These responses pick up on something of the bold revisionist approach of the curators, but they also go some way to explaining why *Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850* did not have a critical legacy and scholarly afterlife comparable to that of the Tate Gallery’s exhibition of 1973.

In 1973, the curators set out to question and complicate received ideas of what was involved in the art of landscape. They had canonical names to work with (Wilson, Gainsborough, Turner, Constable, Palmer), but also recovered many other artists who had been lost to view. The organisers of the 1983 exhibition, on the other hand, had nothing to dismantle. There was nothing comparable at stake, since landscape in the later period did not have the same prestige, and much less had been invested in it. Furthermore, its history had never been written, however schematically. Theirs was the first attempt at an overview, but their survey was guided by no clear thesis.

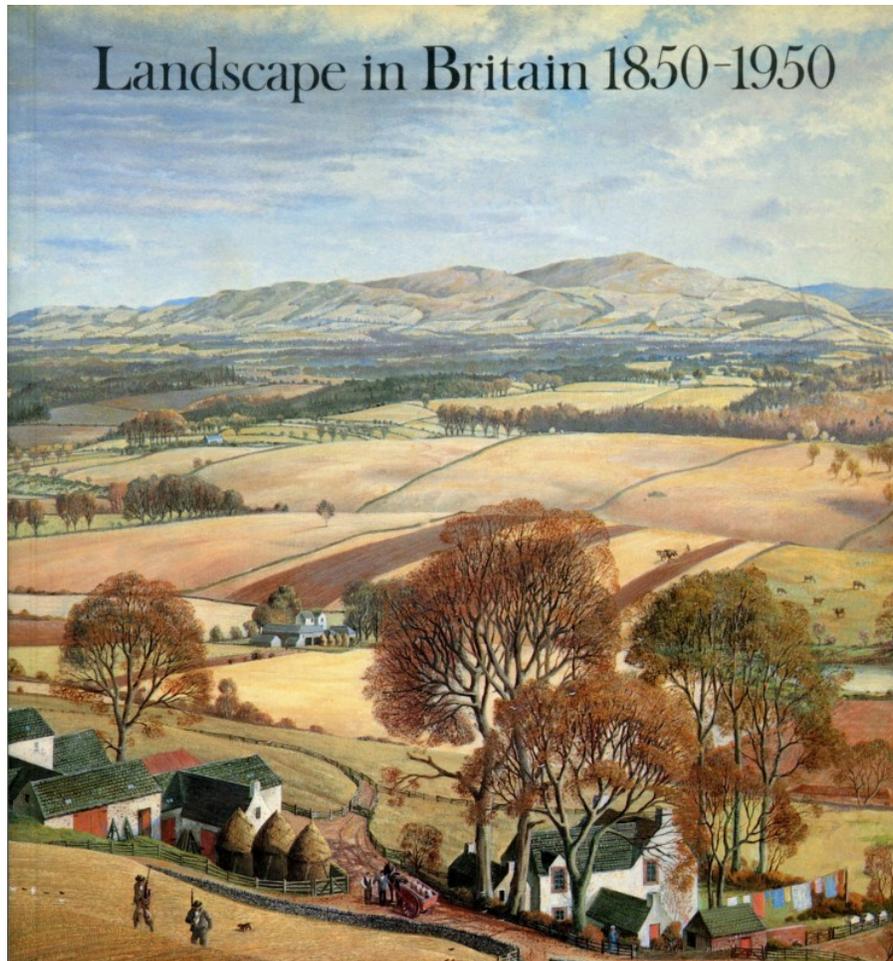


Figure 11.

Landscape in Britain 1850-1950, cover of the exhibition catalogue, 1983. Cover depicts detail of *Autumn, Kinnordy* by James McIntosh Patrick, Dundee Art Galleries and Museums Collection (25-1946). Digital image courtesy of Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre / estate of James McIntosh Patrick.

The accompanying publication did not follow the template of that from 1973 (Fig. 11).⁴³ The two curators each wrote an essay, and the poet Donald Davie contributed a third on the theme of industrial landscape in British literature. There was a detailed decade-by-decade chronology of social and

artistic events; the rest of the publication was given over to entries on the artists, over 200 of them, arranged in order of date of birth, from David Cox (born 1783) to Ken Bennetts (born 1933)—the lack of equivalence here is indicative of the curators' open approach. Biographical notes were given for each artist, resulting in a veritable Dictionary of National Biography of landscape artists of the period—the entries a mine of fascinating information. There was no commentary on any of the exhibited works, however, and therefore no argument was built around them. They remained, frustratingly, at the level of illustration to the biographies. ⁴⁴

But there is also, between 1973 and 1983, a broader distinction to be perceived. Ideas that were first given currency in the early 1970s, and articulated in *Landscape in Britain, c.1750–1850*, continued to work their way productively through the academic scholarship on landscape in the 1980s, resulting in a series of significant publications, but elsewhere the subject of landscape seemed altogether less compelling. ⁴⁵ In contemporary art, for example, in Britain at least, Land art had lost the radical, questioning edge it once had, and more reassuring ideas of nature as material, as resource, began to gain ground, evident in the work of Andy Goldsworthy and David Nash. Two years before their big survey of landscape from 1850–1950, the Arts Council organised a touring exhibition titled *Romanticism Continued*, which included the practice of some of the 1960s and 1970s radicals, such as Hamish Fulton and Barry Flanagan, and accommodated them comfortably to the idea of a British landscape tradition. ⁴⁶ Such an accommodation could not have been reached in the previous decade, when, in the fields both of historical enquiry and contemporary practice, the idea of a tradition of landscape was interrogated with so much scepticism and energy. In 1973, matters had not looked so easily settled.

Footnotes

- ¹ On landmark exhibitions, see Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History, Vol. I, 1863–1959* (London: Phaidon, 2008); and Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History, Vol. II, 1962–2002* (London: Phaidon, 2011). For a history of “Old Master” exhibitions, see Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
- ² Stephen Daniels, “What Landscape Means to Me”, *Landscapes* 12, no. 2 (2011): 91.
- ³ *The Elizabethan Image: Elizabethan and Jacobean Painting in England, 1540–1620* (28 November 1969–8 February 1970); *The Age of Charles I: Painting in England, 1620–1649* (15 November 1972–14 January 1973).
- ⁴ Conal Shields, “Introduction”, in Tate Gallery, *Landscape in Britain, c.1750–1850*, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate Gallery, 1973), 9.
- ⁵ John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
- ⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 106–108. In the broadcast version, Michael Dibb had added a sign reading “Trespassers Keep Out” to Gainsborough’s picture.
- ⁷ Peter Lasko, “Foreword”, in John Gage, *A Decade of English Naturalism 1810–1820*, exhibition catalogue (Norwich: Norwich Castle Museum, 1969), 1.
- ⁸ Leslie Parris letter to lenders, dated 18 March 1971 in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions, TG 92/237/Box 1.
- ⁹ Tate Gallery, *Constable: The Art of Nature*, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate Gallery, 1971), 11.

- 10 The text panel and display are recorded in an installation photograph: Tate Gallery Photography Collection, List No. 11, p. 8. The full text of the introductory panel reads: "John Constable has found, what he never looked for, popularity. But popular images may misrepresent. This exhibition arises from a suspicion that there might be more to Constable than meets most eyes. It documents him as a self-conscious and culture-conscious person and in consequence asks for reconsideration of his work."
- 11 Letter from Colonel J.H. Constable to Norman Reid, dated 9 June 1971 in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions TG 92/237/Box 1.
- 12 Tate Gallery, *Constable: The Art of Nature*, 12.
- 13 Leslie Parris letter to lenders, dated 18 March 1971 in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions, TG 92/237/Box 1.
- 14 R.B. Beckett's edition of *John Constable's Correspondence* was published in six volumes between 1962 and 1968.
- 15 Christopher Dean's designs are in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions, TG 92/265/Box 4. Sheet 119/05 is a preliminary layout plan indicating the placing of all the exhibits.
- 16 Letter from Michael Jaffé to Norman Reid, dated 4 March 1974 in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions, TG 92/265/Box 1.
- 17 From a transcript of the discussion between Edwin Mullins and Edward Lucie-Smith, which was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 23 November 1971, in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions, TG 92/265/Box 1.
- 18 Denys Sutton, *The Financial Times*, 8 January 1974.
- 19 Letter from Ruth Rattenbury to Miss O. Auty, dated 4 February 1974 in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions, TG 92/265/Box 1.
- 20 For an account of the fuel crisis and the national emergency of January and February 1974, see Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: What Really Happened to Britain in the Seventies* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 125-156.
- 21 Daniels, "What Landscape Means to Me", 91.
- 22 Twenty-four installation photographs in Tate Gallery Photography Collection List No. 11, p. 12.
- 23 Letter from Ruth Rattenbury to R.A. Stephenson, dated 17 September 1971 in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions, TG 92/265/Box 1.
- 24 Tate Gallery, *Landscape in Britain, c.1750-1850*, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate Gallery, 1973). Conal Shields contributed the introduction while Leslie Parris was responsible for the selection and catalogue entries. In his Preface, Parris thanked Shields "for help with many other parts of the catalogue, including the sections dealing with the literature of landscape and the Pre-Raphaelites". In this essay, I have taken the exhibition as a fully collaborative project, and have not attempted to distinguish two authorial voices.
- 25 Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890*, exhibition catalogue (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 96.
- 26 Lewis' picture, it should be said, has more often been understood in terms of a Georgic ideal—an image of prosperity, peace, and dignity. See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 115-117; and Hugh Prince, "Art and Agrarian Change, 1710-1815", in Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (eds), *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 112-114. For the dire straits in which Britain found itself in the early 1970s, on the other hand, see Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*; and Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were, Britain 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), especially Chapter 15 "The Last Days of Pompeii", 376-612.
- 27 For a discussion of the parallels between exhibitions of historical landscape and contemporary landscape practice, see Nicholas Alfrey and Joy Sleeman, "Framing the Outdoors: Landscape and Land Art in Britain, 1973-1977", *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 29, nos 1-2 (2009): 83-94.
- 28 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 107; see also John A. Walker, *Arts TV: A History of Arts Television in Britain* (London: John Libbey, 1993), 97.
- 29 Joy Sleeman, "The New Art, Hayward Gallery, London 1972: New as Compromise, or When What Happens Around the Exhibition is as Interesting as What Happens in the Exhibition", *Sculpture Journal* 21, no. 2 (2012), 63-64; and Nicholas Alfrey, Joy Sleeman, and Ben Tufnell, *Uncommon Ground: Land Art in Britain, 1966-1979*, exhibition catalogue (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 11, 109.
- 30 Michael Compton, the curator of *Seven Exhibitions*, quoted in Jo Melvin, "The New Climate, 1969-72", in Andrew Wilson (ed.), *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964-1979*, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 123.
- 31 *John Crome, Paintings and Drawings* (12 October-1 December 1968); *The Shock of Recognition: The Landscape of English Romanticism and the Dutch 17th Century School* (23 January-28 February 1971); and *Caspar David Friedrich: Romantic Landscape Painting in Dresden* (6 September-15 October 1972).
- 32 Tim Hilton, *Studio International* 187, no. 963 (February 1974), 88-89. In the mid-1970s, Hilton's own chief interest was in Ruskin.
- 33 Sutton, *The Financial Times*, 8 January 1974.
- 34 *Studio International* 181, no. 933 (May, 1971).
- 35 Letter from Leslie Parris to Professor David Pye in Tate Gallery Public Records: Tate Exhibitions, TG 92/265/Box 1.
- 36 Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

- 37 The Tate Gallery lent nine of the 266 exhibits in the Hayward exhibition. In 1973, nearly forty of the exhibits came from the Tate's own collection—a significant proportion of the whole.
- 38 Ian Jeffrey interviewed for *Kaleidoscope*, broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 9 February 1983.
- 39 The Hayward Gallery had been the venue for *The New Art* in 1972, and although this had a strong landscape component, as already noted, the connection with landscape was not made explicit at the time. For the Arts Council's role in the promotion of Land art, see Alfrey, Sleeman and Tufnell, *Uncommon Ground*, 108–109.
- 40 William Feaver, "The British Landscape", *The Observer*, 20 February 1983.
- 41 Peter Fuller, "Mother Nature", *New Society*, 17 February 1983; John McEwen, "Downhill", *The Spectator*, 5 March 1983.
- 42 William Packer, *The Financial Times*, 19 February 1983; Michael Shepherd, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 13 February 1983.
- 43 Arts Council, *Landscape in Britain 1850–1950*, exhibition catalogue (London: Arts Council, 1983).
- 44 Ian Jeffrey returned to an aspect of the subject in the following year in his book *The British Landscape 1920–1950* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), essentially a pictorial anthology, organised around the themes of "Dreaming", "The Working Landscape", and "Epic Scenery".
- 45 Between 1980 and the early 1990s, the study of landscape in Britain ca. 1740 to ca. 1860 was carried forward in books and exhibition catalogues by John Barrell, David Solkin, Michael Rosenthal, Ann Bermingham, Stephen Daniels, and Andrew Hemingway, among others, working within a framework already indicated by the 1973 Tate Gallery exhibition.
- 46 Arts Council, *Romanticism Continued*, 1981, a touring exhibition devised by Ian Jeffrey and Brendan Prenderville.

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