

AMERICAN DIRT

Daniel Ganz, Landschaftsarchitekt, Zurich, Switzerland. He once told me to *be prepared at a moment's notice to lose everything*. When he lived in Jamaica, a hurricane swept away his every possession; he has since adopted what seems to be the attitude of a warrior: resolute acceptance of death and loss as an avenue to personal power and freedom. You might wake up one day with your island swept clean ... powerlines down, giant palm fronts draped across crippled cars like death shrouds, trees and buildings uprooted, persons and properties dissolved in thick green air. Amid the storm's aftermath the samurai bows deeply to his opponent: the universe.

The samurai and the gardener know life and death; they see the interconnectedness of things. The blossoming and blooming of springtime plants is a prelude to the processes of death and disintegration that grow new lions, new lambs.

Office of Daniel Ganz, caretaker of growing things, Zurich. Mural of winged gods on the ceiling and view through high windows of a fountain and haze in the hills on the other side of the lake. A silver tray with coffee and cream. Daniel and I are looking at reproductions of Arnold Böcklin's paintings. In the late nineteenth century, in a studio not far from here, Böcklin painted his *Isle of the Dead*: across a calm sea Charon rows his boat bearing a boxed corpse and its upright spirit to a small cypress-studded island of rock—a perfect visual representation of Keats's "silence and slow time."

To my Protestant-American eyes its otherworldly beauty is almost nauseating.

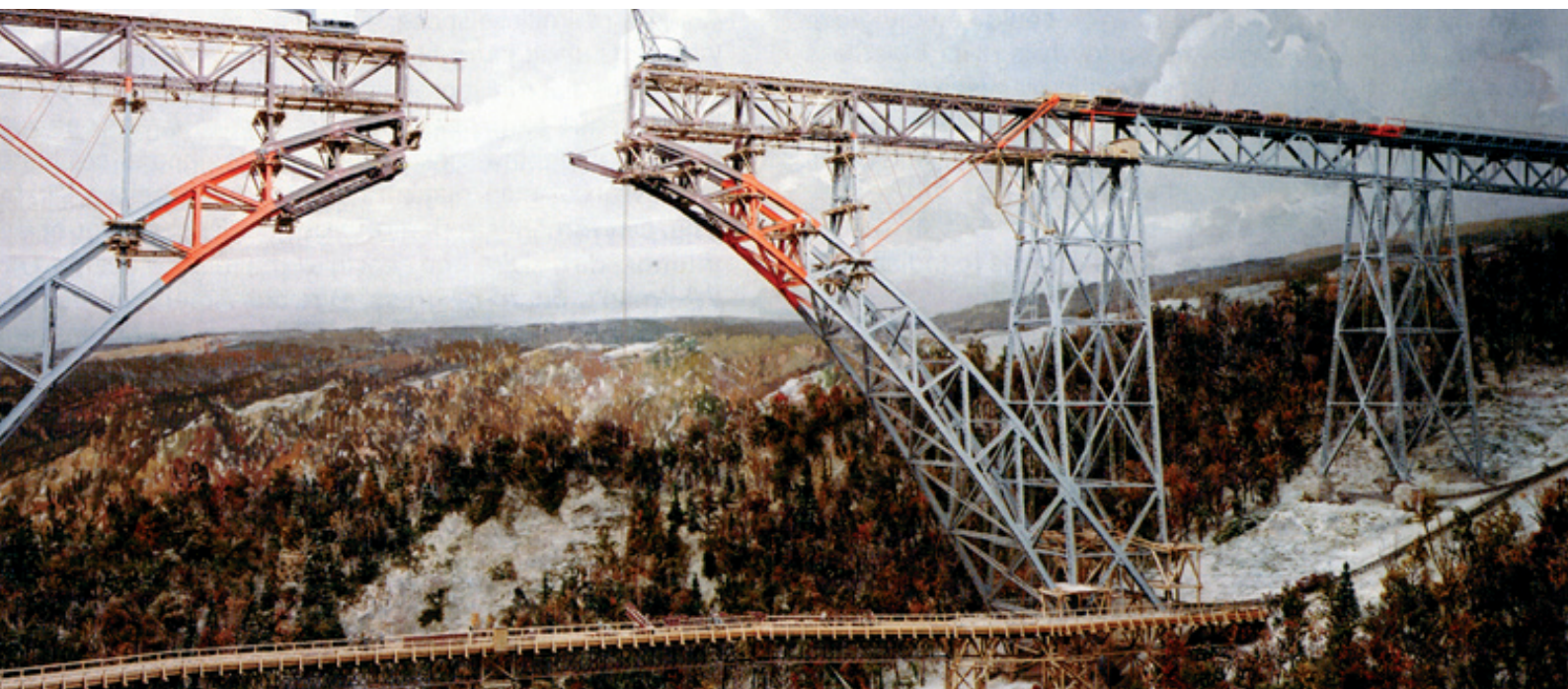
February 2003. It was very cold in Zurich, it was deadly grave and I thought Venice—

Dichotomies. Illuminated pragmatism versus decadence. Darkness and light. Train from Zurich to Milan. Milan to Venice. From darkness to light. Valentine's Day, skies clear and cold. Dream-avalanche of Turkish windows, boats, canals, ecumenical councils, historiography, descending aorta, etc. The visceral *shape* of Venice.

My wife and I dined with a visiting prince from Austria who liked to fly above the city and take aerial photographs of Venice to prove something, I don't know what, about urban density. We talked and ate black squid sauce at a restaurant in the Rialto he'd recently flown over Venice to document the Lagoon. The Lagoon, he explained, was formed six-thousand years ago by sand carried down by rivers and shaped by marine currents. The Venice depicted in his photographs was a blue-green biomorphic blob. The dinner ended, and with a bow and a click of his heels he disappeared like a wisp of silver fairy-tale smoke. Through the window we could see him clicking his camera at the darkness. After dinner we took a walk in the vicinity of the Church of Santa Sofia and shared our memories of a West Texas town called Alpine.

Light upon my shoulder. I felt the hand of the Pope. Couldn't be. But it was him sure as I breathe. My breathing quickened—was it joy? Yes, it was the kind of elation one feels when confronted with the realization of an ideal. Venice was in its winter blankets but, ah, here was sun and warm Catholicism! The very shape of Venice defies the Cartesian grid. The inventors of Venice built a city of murderous, baroque cockfights of intellect and spirit that will endure as Nature permits it to exist. Goethe in Venice. Proust. Ezra Pound. Laundry hanging on lines across the canals on St. Valentine's Day, 2003.

Venice, the day after Valentine's Day. An exhibit of aerial photographs: elephant carcasses in East Africa. The bones are white, heavy and tragic; they are diagrammatic outlines of terror—schematisms of death. I begin to sketch plans for a large rectangular expanse of grassy lawn containing one large oak tree and an elephant skull. I am drawing a "landscape" and it is my gift to Venice. But where would I find the space required for such a project? Salt-flats and rushes surround Venice, but the city proper defies the very notion of landscape. One finds water, stone edifices and the occasional piazza. Motorized boats, no cars. There are people, cats, sewer rats, sparrows, swallows, blackbirds and pigeons. In the canals: crabs, mollusks and fish.



July 2003. Room 214 at the Arizona Hotel, just outside San Bernadino, California. The stink of stale cigarette smoke, the dead furniture, the depressed doors hanging there like meat, the stillness, the glorious golden ennui that saturates the whole of the American West when the sun sets. Switch the TV on ... the humping moans on the Playboy Channel, the basketball ball players humping and moaning and moving, talk shows, local Southern California news of house fires and murder and weather. The TV movies like the landscape seem to originate from nowhere, born from nothing and nobody—the movies play on, impossible to watch without thinking of all the dead elephants in the world that once were and would never be again.

This is how I traveled back to the USA: in a Boeing 747. There are other ways. This is the fastest. Zurich—Amsterdam. Amsterdam—Minneapolis. Minneapolis—Albuquerque, New Mexico. Car to Santa Fe. Sleeping outside, under the stars in Santa Fe. Bushes and shrubs surround an adobe house. My friends have placed baby dolls in the bushes “to frighten the mountain lions.” The dolls know we are here. Because I am inclined to religious feeling I never once doubted they could see me. The sun came up in New Mexico like a transcendental light bulb, as if coming up is what it liked to do. You could see dry green bushes spaced evenly in the sandy hills. It is bloodless land cool to the touch and cracked in places like no hope could enter there. This was the overall feeling I had in New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada. But I have faith in life and death and am not without hope.

Santa Fe friends drove us past Los Alamos to Indian cave dwellings. A stream fed tall trees that stood in a green valley. The hills that rose out of the valley were dry and dotted with dying trees. Drawings of animals were etched in some of the rocks around the caves, and swirling vermiculations spiraled around wooden posts brittle and dry as elephant bones. Everywhere there was evidence of land and landscape, both land and landscape. You could intuit the meaning of the dry rolling land, it basked in its own self-evident perfection, and best of all there was a horizon. If such a horizon could be captured and brought back to Venice-Arizona, July 2003.

Early morning dream. I am an architect. My office is in the New Mexican desert. My client is an old Venetian man obsessed with human odors; he demands an odorless home environment. Odors from skin, clothing and other sources *must be eliminated*.

I carefully explain that this will be possible only if the sizes of occupied rooms are in proportion (a) to the number of people occupying them, (b) to the facilities for ventilation, and (c) to the degree of air contamination likely to occur. He isn't satisfied and quite certain that I am hiding something from him. Wake up, leave the hotel, have pancakes and coffee at a cafe. The desert's waiting out there patient as a hitman. The road is long and dangerous, but I am not without hope. I am in love with the desert, and love fosters hope.

Like America, Venice derives its vigor from its myriad imperfections (annual floods, too many tourists, sinking palaces). Venice is disappearing, but it is still very much alive. *America is here or nowhere*. A line from Goethe. Here in Venice I take it literally. If you dig below the sand and clay of Venice, you will most assuredly find *land*—dirt—and dirt is the beating, bloody, sentimental heart of America. America as promised land. The Grand Canyon America of limitless space and eternal road trips. The place Woody Guthrie sang about. Your land, my land. Puritan dirt, industrial dirt, cornfield dirt and coastal dirt. Dirt to live on, dirt to grow things in, dirt to dream about, to photograph, investigate, contemplate, ignore, celebrate, preserve, haul, map, manipulate, covet, mine, poison. Dirt for sale. Dirt romanticized, dirt forgotten. Department of the Interior dirt. Dirt the earth's malleable scalp. Dirt Whitman's beard of grass. Dirt our American identity, our home. Dirt is site, and site is a rotation of the mind and spirit. A broad latitudinal glow of the heart. Site is measurement and analysis and ownership, it is also human and poetic and silly—the way we put fences around things and say: these are my beans, that's your wheat. Your land, my land, our land hosting great earth-moving machines forced into labor to reveal what is under the dirt—the strange and brilliant stones and bones, the insect-animal fossils of creatures long extinct, the animals yet living.

Hours of driving on Interstate 40. Our hearts are beating in the car, on the land. As placed in the body, the heart has an oblique position—the right side is almost in front of the left. The pounding of the heart in your chest cavity or wall is felt in the space between the fifth and sixth ribs, just below the left nipple on a man (or sentient doll) and about 8 cm (3 in.) to the left of the median line. We located our hearts in the desert on the land, in the desert under the sky.

Landscape is largely defined by the sky. When it's blue the sky is sky, when it rains it's heaven. Too much rain in the desert, however, can be hell.

Death Valley, California. July 2003. Mountains the color of death. White-hot sun burning all life, all color. Not even a bird visible, nor anything crawling, not a single cheerful bud of green, no cooling blue, nothing but dead yellow and browns drained of their red. Clouds from nowhere and a sudden downpour, raindrops the size of baseballs. To our left a mountain and stretch of flat land to our right. The land cannot take the water. Redemptive rains overwhelm the mountains, tons of rock and mud and debris cascade like a chocolate milk waterfall down the side of the mountain, and our truck is in its way. Our driver screams. To die like this? And here of all places? Reverse, back out of it, the mud, the bleeding mountain, the giant rocks falling and tumbling—pull over and breathe. There are three of us in the truck, three people who did not die on this land, this dirt. And it rains. Within seven minutes, the road that was is a gaping wet hole of terror, not a "place" anymore, not something, not *there*.

Where I live with my wife at Bremgartnerstrasse 3 in Zurich, it rains hard, and often.

Hart Crane: "This was the Promised Land, and still it is / To the persuasive suburban land agent / In bootleg roadhouses where the gin fizz / Bubbles in time to Hollywood's new love-nest pageant."

A Los Angeles parking lot on a Sunday. A row of art galleries. Palm tree. Billboard. Office building. American flag. I have a camera, but there's nothing to take a picture of.

A tall smiling man with a short nose and long white hair is walking out of one of the galleries. It's John Baldessari. He has just bought a Diane Arbus photo from one of the galleries and he is enjoying the California light. There is a woman with him, younger, maybe his daughter, maybe his wife. She smiles with him. It has been a good day for John Baldessari. They get into a green Range Rover. He drives the lady and his white hair away. There is sky and horizon and site.

Everything today in Los Angeles is landscape.

In Quaker meeting houses they sit in circles and wait for the Spirit. For weeks now we have been waiting in the desert like Quakers, waiting for the moon which is full of the sun's light. The moon is the matrix from which human intuition originates. We are human beings, men and women. We want to have a sense of control over our lives, but the world is mysterious. We like to experience mystery. We want to experience God.

What salvation is there to be found in the dirt of these United Calvinist States of America?

Malibu. The Pacific Ocean is cold and salty, the milky green-blue water is not unlike springtime waters that rush through Swiss tributaries. The ocean is wet and loud—a new promise, a new threat. In a world of water, landscapes end.