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Interactive comment on “From soil in art towards Soil Art” by C. Feller et al.

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I firmly stand behind the conceptual goal of this paper in contributing towards a wider audience awareness of "ecological art", inside which "soil art" could play a very interesting role in revealing what the authors claim to be the "4th natural world", an "organised natural body" which lies hidden under the topographical landscape. As an architect and artist specialised in landscape urbanism and landscape representation, this idea seems very pertinent and quite original to me. However, I also believe that the paper suffers from a few conceptual/structural problems which reveal a less than scientific knowledge of art history. I clarify below:

1. Distinction between the concepts of "soil" and "landscape":

I believe the paper could benefit from a clearer distinction between the concepts of

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“soil” and “land”, or “landscape”. It seems that these concepts are at times differentiated and at other times used interchangeably. Clarifying their distinction could avoid some unclear overlaps and perhaps justify the quite significant overlook of landscape painting theory during the period between the 17th and 19th centuries (its most fertile time). Landscape painting, the secular art theme that is deeply linked to the rise of the Dutch protestant bourgeoisie, had its peak moment during the romantic period, and attempting at a synthesis of landscape painting without talking about the concepts of “beauty”, “picturesque” and “sublime” feels like a significant overlook. This overlook leads me to the next point. Nevertheless, clarifying the distinction between “soil” and “landscape” could be enough reason to solve this problem by avoiding the landscape topic altogether.

2. Historicist/linear comprehensive structure versus collection of fragmented examples:

The paper might benefit from a less historicist, linear build up, and rather be just a collection of relevant samples, fragments of art history which together build a retroactive manifesto for soil art (and this would also help to bypass the whole complicated “Landscape painting” topic altogether). At present I believe both of these conditions are present, which leads to a certain ambiguity in the paper. Chapter 2, with its sub-chapters being named “Before 20th century” and “From beginning of 20th century” makes the reader expect a comprehensive synthesis of the role of soil in painting, which is a fairly ambitious goal for this kind of short work, and which then sets the reader up for disappointment. Even this chapter: “2.3 Soil in realism and abstraction: case studies from the 20th century” seems to be wrongly named, since the text does not so much present a comprehensive role of soil in realist and abstract art, it analyses two case studies which work with soil. I believe this article is most successful when it does precisely this – provide a collection of juxtaposed fragments, case studies of soil art – and it could become clearer and more straight to the point if it repeated this structure all over.

3. Gesamtkunstwerk? (p.102)

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I would seriously dispute the idea of comparing an art installation to a total work of art. Gesamtkunstwerk is a romantic concept that has to do with the artist controlling and defining the content and the form of the art piece. It was highly disputed in the Modernist period, especially by the neo-avant-garde movements of the 60's. Installation art, environmental art, performances, happenings, land art, minimalism, etc., were part of a movement of art which intended to deeply question the idea of art as an object and the top-down relationship between: artist as god-like author > significant art object > passive subject viewer. They were all trying to include the viewer in the art piece, making him an author too. That is why they left the gallery spaces and occupied the landscape and the city. More on this topic in these Two seminal texts on this topic: Roland Barthes, 1967, Death of Author. Rosalind Krauss, 1979, Sculpture in the Expanded Field. This article in <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/zeitung/the-myth-of-the-gesamtkunstwerk/1323622.html> especially the 4th paragraph.

As a general note, I think the case studies chosen are pertinent and make for an interesting overview. I would generally avoid generalist statements about art style or periods and instead focus on examples. I would hope that the conclusion could perhaps be a little more pushy towards the idea of how art can play a role in creating images of realities and spatial dimensions that humans cannot perceive empirically, bringing them to our collective consciousness and making them meaningful. This is, after all, the role of art in society, and its complimentary role towards science, is it not?

Interactive comment on SOIL Discuss., 2, 85, 2015.

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