

Strangeness, Ecognosis, and the dark ecologies of the Waning River

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Keywords

Dark ecology, Agrilogistics, Contaminated landscapes

Cities,” Koolhaas declares, are “places of cuteness,” of a whimsicality enabled by the rationality that dominates the countryside. Urbanity and countryside are in opposition: “In terms of contrast to the city,” Koolhaas states, the countryside has the “potential to be really its opposite;” against its cuteness, vast rural-industrial sheds are beautiful, “the definition of the sublime.” But the formal changes that Koolhaas observes – which undoubtedly affect the periphery – are driven by urban logics. The apparent radicality of the contemporary countryside in Koolhaas’ thesis leaves unchallenged the relationship which Marx once described: the countryside remains subject to forces of urbanization.

To re-read a peripheral landscape I will linger on the strangeness of the small, as an alternative to the vastness of the sublime. Through Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology*, which offers a rebuke of agrilogistics, I will describe a design-research project which aims toward an ‘ecognosis’, an ‘awareness’ of an industrial-agricultural landscape enmeshed within a specific dark ecology. The project is based in a town in North Yorkshire, England. In 2024, this town was declared the most contaminated site in Britain. Firefighting foams containing PFAS had been (legally) discharged into lagoons that periodically overflowed, contaminating the surrounding land, river, and groundwater. The project explores ways to inhabit this contaminated landscape. Small, speculative interventions located along the river are folded into morphological studies of agricultural settlements. Recalling the geological erratics which populate the surrounding hills, the forms of these interventions negotiate weathering and decay. Through these interventions I will argue that if we are to reassess architecture’s relationship with the countryside, or other peripheral territories, it should not be through an agrilogistic project validated by bigness, but by reconsidering how forces are made present, and retain their strangeness; we must become “ac-customed to strangeness that doesn’t become less strange through acclimation.”