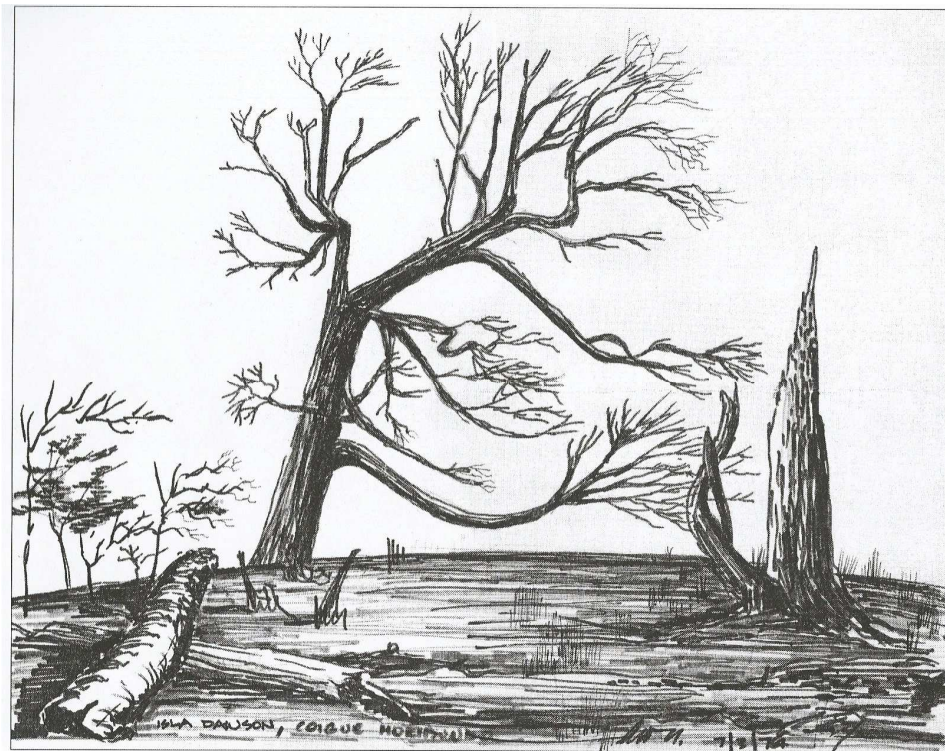


The ends of nature: Latin American modernity and the crisis of landscape

This is an extract of a talk delivered by Professor Jens Andermann, Chair of Latin American and Luso-Brazilian Studies, University of Zurich, 2 March 2016.

This sketch by Miguel Lawner, a Chilean architect, is called 'Isla Dawson, coigüe moribundo' (Moribund Coigüe tree, Dawson Island), and it is dated March 7th, 1974 — that's roughly half a year after the military coup that deposed the constitutional government of Salvador Allende on September 11th, 1973.



Coigüe is the native Mapudungun name for *Nothofagus dombeyi*, an evergreen tree species abounding below 35 latitude south. Dawson island, on the southern shore of the Beagle canal, was once covered by dense Coigüe forests until, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Chilean government granted a lumbering concession to the Gente Grande logging company which, within a mere thirty years, exterminated the native population and devastated the forests, leaving behind a desolate swamp that's now among the most inhospitable places on earth. One suspects that Lawner might have had this history of primitive accumulation in mind when sketching these

ravaged landscapes where only the odd solitary tree resists the onslaught of the elements: places of sorrow that must have appeared to him as a striking allegory of the horror which had befallen Chile as a whole under the Pinochet dictatorship.

Yet the drawing's meaning is hardly exhausted by this allegorical dimension.

Lawner's sojourn on Dawson island was actually anything but a voluntary retreat. The director of the Urban Improvement Agency under Allende, Lawner had been detained after the military coup and, along with other high-ranking officials, had been sent to a concentration camp on Dawson Island where the prisoners, many of them elderly, were being subjected to a regime of hard labour under extreme conditions, including beatings, torture and simulated executions. After the first months during which they were strictly denied reading and writing materials, Lawner and a group of fellow inmates convinced the camp commander to let them undertake, instead of the useless tasks imposed on them purely for the purpose of humiliation, the restoration of the nearby church of Puerto Harris, a wooden construction from the end of the nineteenth century. As an architect, Lawner was entrusted with supervising the project and granted permission to receive from relatives some notebooks and chalk for drawing up a set of plans, which included, incidentally, a small garden area with wooden walkways and a palisade of *Coigüe* trees to provide shelter from the elements. In unobserved moments, Lawner would also use his drawing materials to chronicle life at the camp, sketches he and his companions would hide under their mattresses and heaps of clothing. In March 1974, some drawings were smuggled out of the camp and passed on to the prisoners' wives and relatives; others, among them *Coigüe moribundo*, were discovered when the prisoners were transferred to other torture centres. Immediately thereafter, Lawner's wife Anita was kidnapped and tortured by the secret police, on suspicion that her husband's landscape sketches contained coded messages for the resistance. Only on convincing themselves that there was indeed nothing more in these drawings than what met the eye, the agents eventually released Anita Lawner, even returning most of the confiscated drawings to her, which the couple, on being allowed to go into exile later that year, managed to take along to Denmark where they were published and exhibited, circulating widely in the international solidarity network.

Yet perhaps the regime wasn't altogether wrong in mistrusting the landscape sketches even more than the ones detailing the hardship and humiliations to which the camp

inmates were being subjected, even though its ‘message’ was indeed plain to see. Because, as images devoid of any documentary or architectonic purpose, these sketches most of all defied the camp’s carceral regime by re-affirming the autonomy of a creative subject forging an aesthetic relationship with the surrounding environment and thus, also his own place within it: a dimension of individual sovereignty the camp’s routinized violence was out to erase. The landscape sketches, then, were also complementary with the ‘landscaping’ of the Puerto Harris churchyard, whose ‘arboreal curtain’ sheltering a tiny flower garden, dared to imagine, in the idiom of gardening, a relation of mutual tenderness and care between a community and its habitat that contrasted sharply with the violence the carceral regime of the camp and the extractive economy exerted on bodies and the land. Both modes of landscaping, in fact, re-affirmed in the very place of horror the project of justice the concentration camp was seeking to root out, since –as Robert Pogue Harrison tells us– ‘human gardens *do not*, as one hears so often, bring order to nature; rather, they give order to our relation to nature. It is our relation to nature that defines the tension at the center of which stands not only the garden but human polis as such.’

Against the scenes of violence that form the chronicle of life at the camp, the landscapes oppose a twofold gesture of re-affirmation of the individual and the community, one on the level of the image, the other on that of the garden as cultivated place. If, in the drawings, the viewing subject assumes the position of a traveller who projects his gaze over an as yet unknown expanse of space, which the gaze nonetheless already explores and arranges into volumes, tones and shades, the garden offers us a place where to hold our step and ‘be at peace’ with the surroundings. In this way, we can see how the drawing produced by the traveller, who puts himself at a distance in order to better study and understand the relations between the ‘natural elements’ already anticipates the ‘cultivation of place’ undertaken by the gardener; in the same way as the garden puts at the traveller’s disposal a repertoire of ‘natural beauty’ according to which the latter can ‘frame’ the new and singular world he has laid eyes on (every landscape is a ‘new world’ insofar as it submits to a formal repertoire, a mode of framing, a singular act of perception). The landscape-image and the garden-landscape both confront the challenge, in their different registers, of how to ground in a singular topography an aesthetic modality of supposedly universal reach – one that the garden, moreover, has to sustain also in the dimension of time, in

a relation of mutual care and adaptation between vegetable materiality and environmental practices. As a form or as an idea, in other words, landscape also points to a possibility of reconciling the ‘local’ and the ‘universal’, place and space, the particular and the common: to a mode of inhabiting that, in its political dimension, resonates with the third-world socialism of the Latin American left as well as, on the level of aesthetics, with the avant-gardes’ quest for accommodating the cosmopolitanism of their formal revolutions with the experiential, linguistic and ecological density of the local context.

For Lawner, indeed, the scandal was not his having found time for drawing landscapes in the midst of terror but, on the contrary, the existence of scenes of violence and inhumanity in an environment the travelling draughtsman’s gaze and the gardener’s cultivation still allowed to perceive as landscape. Set against the sketches and garden plans, these acts of violence become forms of profanation, not only of the prisoners’ bodies but also of an environment that is left tarnished by violence. In the context of landscape, violence –the vision of bodies exposed to humiliation and terror– also turns into a scandal of representation, as an infringement of the genre’s fundamental rules based on attitudes of curiosity and care and exposing, in this way, the larger scandal of the dictatorship’s transgression of the very foundations of social coexistence.



Miguel Lawner, Tendido de cables, Dawson (febrero de 1974)