Dune Gleaner

Some thoughts and photographs from the Curonian Spit

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Everything here is built on sand. A thin humus of civilization and cultivation hides underneath it more sand than is possible to grasp. The ground one walks on stays still with a delicate balance and due to a two centuries of labor by humans and nature alike. Describing something as *built on sand* means that it is unreliable, its foundations unstable. The once roaming dunes may be forested hills now but the potential of the dune still lies buried just beneath the surface.

The Curonian Spit was deforested over the span of a century mostly because of human intervention. Once people took action to reverse the process, it took another hundred years to fix what had been lost. There were forests and plantlife on the spit before humans started cutting them down and grazing livestock. By the end of the 1700s most of it had vanished and villages were in danger.

The massive sand dunes, not held down by plants anymore, were constantly moving, swallowing entire villages as they went. Some houses had doors that were divided in two parts so that if the lower part was blocked by sand during the night, you could open the upper part and get out to clear away the sand. It might take a decade for a village to be covered entirely. But one might also wake up in the morning to find that the sand had reached your house, and you'd know it would be time to dismantle your house, gather your things and move the entire village elsewhere. Overall at least 14 villages were buried between the 1600s and 1800s. The contemporary town of Nida is its third incarnation.

Nowadays people still have to work to stop the dunes from moving, but instead of protecting human living environments and livelyhoods, now the dunes are the ones being protected. Once the they had been stopped, the dunes together with the act of stopping them eventually became an object of conservation via UNESCO cultural heritage status.

Funnily enough, in UNESCO's story the peninsula was "threatened by the natural forces of wind and waves", not humans. It was the "ceaseless human efforts" that eventually saved the spit. Isn't it the other way around? Was it not humans that were threatened, not the spit? And was it not mostly because of human efforts that the spit was deforested to begin with? Who was threatening whom and can a spit even feel threatened?

Life must have been very pared-down in the 18th century. An informational plaque in the forest behind Nida described the lives of locals as miserable. An account from a visiting mainlander described the locals of Curonia as ones without hopes and dreams. Outsider's views might sometimes overestimated. There must have been some reason for people to stay? Maybe there was some beauty, not just threat in the surroundings. In the late 1800s the grand dunes surrounding Nida were referred to as "The Sahara of the North" by visitors. At least to contemporary eyes, the landscape holds a different kind of beauty and serenity than most places in Europe.

It's easy to be horrified at how people could have let things get to the point where by the 1800s almost the entire spit was essentially a desert. But we are arguably doing a similar thing now, albeit at a larger scale. Just like humans in the centuries before could not grasp the damage they were doing over several generations before it was too far gone, we too have trouble grasping the global effects of the commodification of all things, the spreading of supply chains accross the whole planet. It is difficult, if not near impossible to see something you can't point at, something that spans over vast timescales or distances.

Human activity seems to have become regarded as the driving force of the world, as is evident in the anthropocene discussion of recent years. But what the history of the Curonian Spit in the past three centuries shows is that natural forces will often eventually prevail over human histories. It was sea currents and shifting sands that were going to swallow up the Curonians centuries before, and it was mountain pines and beachgrasses that did most of the work to stop it. Nature is resilient on its own.

The trouble that went into afforesting the Spit was incredible. It took a century to build the hundred kilometer long protective dune along the Baltic shoreline. In many cases the spit and it's current state is described as a collaboration between human endeavours and natural forces. That seems an apt description, since even though the protective dune was purportedly built by people, the actual method was to create conditions for the dunes to form, after which it was the wind and the sea that formed it.

Considering the huge amount of labor and organization it's somehow funny to consider that planting mountain pines was an accident to begin with: in an amusing example of earlier international supply chains, fir seeds were ordered from Denmark and mountain pine seeds were delivered instead. Regardless of all the planning and resources, the landscape of the spit could have turned out radically different. How would the story have unfolded if the spruce had been planted? One thing is clear, the landscape would have been very different.

The mountain pines were not planted so they could be used as a resource, but more like a tool. They are a tool for petrifying the dune in place with their roots. Once cut down they become building material for new, artificial dunes. Mountain pines are laid down on the ground and on dune walls where they slowly gather sand that is blowing in the wind.

The mountain pine seemed adept at resisting commodification for a long time. Even though the pines are planted and therefore somewhat domesticated, they manage to stay feral. They grow in shapes that don't give way to any geometry that would make them useful as timber. They also grow slowly, with full-grown century old trees still almost seeming more like branches compared to faster growing Baltic pine. The hills where mountain pine were planted also grow so dense as to almost be impenetrable to humans, making them more or less inaccessible for recreational use either.

Compared to the untameable mountain pine forest, the plantations of Baltic pine are at the other end of the scale. They are uniform and accessible planned environments. When walking around Nida, you can catch glimpses of the planning when you find long straight lines, rows of monocultured trees that you wouldn't find in a self-seeded or old growth forest.

Most of the spit is split by straight lines at also at a larger scale. In aerial images you can see the many squares and shapes formed between treeless tracts used for fire prevention and vehicle access. A straight line cuts through a mountain pine thicket and on the next square there might be a clear cut full of young birches growing out of the moss-covered ground. Clear divisions of different phases and methods of silviculture make the forest controllable and intelligible. People need the mapping of geometry onto the terrain to make sense of it all: no need to consider the individual tree or the whole forest ecosystem. Just perform the prescribed action on this specific square.

Geometry is decidedly “unnatural”, but then again it is somehow honest. There is no doubt about the origins of this forest once you start to find the geometries within. It is a cultivated landscape. It’s not picturesque, it’s a plantation. Geometry quite literally means *earth measurement*. As such, it is one of the basic tools to achieve a rationalization of our environment, a way of bringing it under human control and understanding.

Geometric designs of urban spaces represent the excercise of reason, in contrast to the forest which in Western though is often considered as *outside* both literally and figuratively. It is both outside the space of the city and outside the social contract and civic space. When these geometric forms are imposed on the forest, spaces of arbitrariness and irrationality also become *spaces of reason*.

“Clear-cut” can also mean “straight-forward”. Thinking about these two expressions together paint a picture about the relationship we have with our environment: one of control through geometry and of extraction through decimation. Straight things are clear things.

Geometry is one obvious technique by which natural things can be translated into resources and commodities. A tree growing in the forest is felled and a sawmill transforms it into standardized timber. Thus these uniform pieces of wood are made interchangeable and quantifiable, so that they can be valued at the marketplace and traded. Making the end product interchangeable also makes it feel abundant: there is a whole lumberyard full of generic planks, no need to be frugal.

The alienation through geometry is very effective: it's much more difficult for me to cut down a growing tree than it is to cut in half a piece of timber. When looking at the evenly sized and straight boards it is hard to imagine it was once a living thing. Even though somebody necessarily had to cut down a living tree at some point to eventually produce the board, the physical and mental distance from the act of cutting makes the tree more accessible for human consumption.

A scene at the beginning of the documentary *The Time of Forests* shows a spruce being cut down and trimmed by a harvesting machine. It is staged like a murder scene, with the tree trunk being violently jerked out of frame in a dimly lit tree plantation. Maybe there is something to that: the extremely expensive and sophisticated and violent machine taking the life out of the tree and turning it into a commodity?

There is a clichéd story about Michelangelo that he wasn't actually sculpting marble at all, he just needed to find the sculpture that was already inside. Just like there always seemed to be a human figure hiding inside the marble, there always seems to be a standard piece of lumber hiding inside the tree.

The trees of Neringa on the other hand are mostly not used for lumber. Loggers call it "firewood", which describes in one word the status and value that is given to the trees. Local timber mostly goes on to be used as biofuel, meaning that the wood is ground into chips and burned. Even though burning wood chips is also used as an energy source locally, the kiln here can't accept local wood

because of its high resin content. So local wood chips are sent to the mainland to be burned there, and mainland wood chips are again shipped to the Curonian Spit to be burned here.

This is a world where we still seem to operate without scarcity. Would it not make sense to burn the wood that is already being cut down locally instead of shipping loads of it back and forth? The wood itself is not desirable on the marketplace because of it's strange shapes and other qualities. One forester speculated that maybe if it wasn't for the biofuel market, clear cuts wouldn't even be popular on the Spit. Burning wood produces a similar amount of emissions as burning coal, with manyfold less energy output. I guess if you don't let the wood fossilize first, burning it becomes a solution to the climate crisis. Biofuel has a better ring to it than fossil fuel.

Supply chains have extended the material reach of a single human to the ends of the Earth. Compared to clothing or electronics from Asia, woodchips from within the country's borders doesn't seem so crazy. But wood is a great example of the inefficiencies of the

purportedly efficient capitalist market system: trees grow in most places in the world, but still they are transported accross vast distances because the market is always trying to find cheaper, not better, alternatives.

A logger in *The Time of Forests* was asked if a modern planted forest is actually more of a plantation. He responded that no, it is a garden. This description hardly seems fitting when looking at a clear cut. The aftermath looks more like a war zone than anything else. Maybe it is not advisable to make aesthetic judgements regarding ecological sustainability but the whole situation does remind me of the meme where a cartoon character is sitting in the midst of a burning house and stating: “This is fine.”

For a long time, land was not considered valuable on the Spit, since it was not well suited for agriculture or grazing. The original reason for stopping the dunes may have been to save the homes of villagers and the ancient postal route, but this eventually lead to the possibility of real estate speculation.

Once the Spit was no longer so inhospitable, visiting it started to become attractive to tourists. This eventually lead to real estate becoming very desirable. Nowadays Neringa has the highest average income of all municipalities in Lithuania. You wouldn't think it by walking around, especially off-season. Nida feels empty in the winter: you don't see many people. It seems like the more luxurious the house, the more likely it is to sit unused. Buying real estate is inaccessible to most and those who have lived here since before the boom rent out their apartments in the summer and move out of the way, at some points in time even into cellars and storage units.

This might be considered an example of what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls *salvage accumulation*. The current real estate market is salvaging the fruits of 200 years of labor by people and other natural forces. First the preconditions for living were destroyed by human intervention, then a new landscape was formed through further human intervention, after which the end result is now protected because of its unique qualities. The protected status of the area also creates scarcity in the real estate market: not many new

buildings get building permits so the prices surge for those few that get built. The once most inhospitable and least desirable place has become the most desirable. Accumulation of sand becomes accumulation of land becomes accumulation of wealth.

It takes a long time for nature to produce the materials we use for building our worlds. Trees grow for at least decades, sand for concrete takes hundreds or thousands of years to form, and the solid rock we use for building or paving was formed millions of years ago.

If asked to look out the window of the Art Colony library and describe what in the view is *human* and what is *nature*, most would probably point out artist Eduardas Jonusas house as human, along with the radio tower and the lighthouse. Possibly also the roads and the lawns. But the forested hills you see were also planted by people, two centuries ago. Of course that doesn't mean the forests are *human* in their entirety, but neither is the artist's house. The wood in it's structure, the clay in its roofing, the metal in its window frames, the sand in it's concrete foundation. Both the

forest hill and the house are agglomerations of both nature's and human's labor. There is no humanity separate from nature. Nature and culture had to be forcibly separated to create the possibility for accumulation. Nature itself does not accumulate as a resource.

Anna Tsing asserts that global capitalism needs different kinds of *translations* for nature to turn into commodity and eventually to accumulation of capital. Logging-oriented forestry has been accelerating these translations and the ensuing alienation for well over a century. As a business it is not very agile. It's a product of modernity of the highest order: appropriation of nature with abandon, complex ecosystems reduced to equations and simplified plantation techniques, non-human entities turned into measurable commodities. The scale of production has grown so large it seems impossible to reverse. You have to get the big machine to get the amount of productivity you need to be competitive. Then you have to keep production levels up since the cost of keeping the enormous machines running is so high. There is no turning back, in this terrible feedback loop the only option is to scale up. Progress moves only in one direction.

Thinking of nature as a group of singular objects like a single tree is a way to separate them from their surroundings, slowly turning them into something to be appropriated and consumed. But it is a gross simplification of a complex web of relations that is required to produce the tree. The logging companies perform different operations to translate the labor of the forest into the sphere of value production.

But who is actually performing most of the labor in this process? Is it the logging companies and loggers who check on the trees every now and then and in a short instant cut them down and into pieces? Or is it the tree, the forest? The growing of a forest is mostly done by a multitude of other actors than humans, and that free labor is then turned into value to benefit people. The work of trees, fungi, micro-organisms and others is appropriated for free.

Trees and forests have been anthropomorphized quite a bit in the recent past. Trees and plants are said to communicate, feel, even think. I was taught as a child that one shouldn't hammer nails into trees, because it will hurt them. I don't recall thinking of the tree

having similar feelings that humans do, I just recall feeling a sort of responsibility towards another living thing. I'm unsure if trying to make trees seem more human is (or should be) necessary? Then again, maybe seeing other things as more human we can reversely start to think that we ourselves are not that different from other beings.

I still feel a tiny sting if I see a sign nailed to a tree. When woodworking it sometimes seems too easy, almost disrespectful towards the tree to use big power tools to cut them in an instant. But what does it matter if the tree is getting cut either way? I guess the central thought is a kind of respect towards the tree: that one shouldn't fell or damage a tree in vain.

I've always had a kind of gleaner's mindset. Gleaning is the act of collecting leftover crops after harvest which was traditionally granted as a right to the poor so that they could find sustenance from fields owned by others wealthier than them. But just as Agnes Varda extends the definition in her film *Gleaners and I*, I too find the term useful in other situations. I find it rewarding to try and

utilize things that have been deemed unnecessary or discarded and making things out of them again. Back in the day half of the furniture I had was reclaimed from dumpsters around the city. Here in the Art Colony wood workshop I also gravitated towards the reject piles and offcuts. The wood of the Neringa Forest Architecture residency programme has been locally sourced and bought for the lowest price level, as firewood, because the only deemed viable use is as biofuel. So the workshop is stocked with the rejects of the timber industry and I use the rejects of the wood workshop.

There is an appreciation of material in gleaning: why not find use for something that already exists, that has already been processed once over instead of extracting virgin materials or resources? I feel that in general there is not much respect for matter in the world, whereas I have trouble throwing anything away. One might claim that being overtly attached to material things is the foundation of consumer culture. But I feel that the issue is not that people focus too much on material things, but that maybe they don't focus on them enough!

Which ever way we look at it, people's lived are built around and with matter. We should aim to mend our relation to material things. To bring to the forefront the things themselves, instead of their more abstract value like that determined by the market. Cheap things use up resources just as expensive things do, and a more sane relationship to consuming those resources is needed. In a finite world we should consider carefully each instant we decide to extract something from the Earth.

The less valueable a thing is, the easier it is to discard. Something with no value at all is waste. Such is the case of land improvement: anything that is not utilized for extraction, recreation or as commodity, is wasteland. What could be more of a wasteland than a desert, seemingly full of nothing? But the desert or the dune might not be as empty as they seem.

Nida might be built on sand, but as it turns out, most buildings are also built *out of sand*, as a third of concrete is sand. An accumulation of sand can spell the spreading of a desert, of a kind of *nothingness*. But the forest too was the perpetual *outside*, an irrational *wasteland* until it was appropriated. Such is the way that spaces that are seemingly full of nothing turn into resources.

Contrary to what one might think, not all sand is the same, and only some is usable for concrete production. We accumulate sand at an alarming rate in the concrete buildings we build. But because there is seemingly infinite amounts of it, the mental image of sand is that it needs to be cheap. So it too is carted around the world just like any other commodity. What a strange situation where at one time humans spent centuries to stop sand from moving and at another they cant stop moving it themselves.