

CARLO SCOCCIANI

Artlands

Creating Natural Habitats as
a New Art Form

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PUBLISHED BY
Gli Ori, Pistoia

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND PAGE LAYOUT
Gli Ori Redazione

ARTWORK DESCRIPTIONS
Carlo Scoccianti

PHOTOGRAPHS
Carlo Scoccianti
The photographs from p. 226 to p. 237 are by Peppe Maistro

The satellite image on pp. 22-23 has been granted for use
by the Regional Council of Tuscany (orthophoto 2021)

COPY EDITOR
Antony St. George Bowden

PREPRESS AND PRINTING
Bandecchi e Vivaldi, Pontedera

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For the Gli Ori edition
For the texts and photos, the authors and photographers
ISBN 978-88-7336-907-3
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www.gliori.it
www.artlands.net

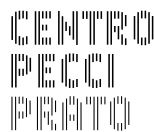
Cover photo
A little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) taking flight
Photo by Carlo Scoccianti

BOOK PROMOTED BY
Comitato per le Oasi WWF dell'Area Fiorentina
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Toscana in contemporanea 2022

Carlo Scoccianti's *Artlands*: a Fascinating Union of Art and Nature

Let's begin with definitions. The noun “art” (according to the Oxford Languages dictionary offered by Google) indicates any application of human creative skill that produces works to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power. The print edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, meanwhile, states that one of this word's various meanings refers to a cultural product that – since it derives from human craft – is often contrasted with “nature”. This sense is widely used in theories of aesthetics and beauty, and it outlines a distinction that is also rooted in daily life. Indeed, gripped as we are by the frenetic pace of a society based on profit and consumption, we only manage to reserve a distracted glance for the world around us. It is therefore an unreal distinction, but strongly felt and often charged with tangible significance when human endeavours (which include art, but deprived of its privileged meaning) act to the detriment of nature.

We can, however, disregard these considerations if we see art and nature from the perspective of *Artlands*, the courageous project conceived by Carlo Scoccianti, a biologist by training and a passionate naturalist who unites art with nature. Thanks to him and the many people and institutions that believe in his dream, areas of territory exploited and depreciated by intensive agriculture have been transformed into vibrant wetlands. These new living habitats of great fascination and beauty have been created with an admirable combination of scientific rigour and aesthetic research. On one hand, Scoccianti has physically implemented theoretical principles of conservation ecology, and on the other, he has taken the opportunity to engage in a profound investigation of the conceptual and aesthetic aspects of these new landscapes, which, through his action, have become “settings” where human beings, like other species, are invited to live.

Luciano Di Tizio
President of WWF Italy

Walking on the Globe:

Carlo Scoccianti's *Artlands*

Carlo Scoccianti's *Artlands* is an ongoing project taking shape a few kilometres from the Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art in Prato, Tuscany. Located not far from the highway and low-density settlements, the sites chosen by Scoccianti have been neglected by the urban and industrial development of the province of Florence. Sometimes used as an illegal dumping ground and partially designated as a flood basin for the Bisenzio and Arno rivers, this stretch of land seemed destined for degradation and abandonment. Scoccianti has recognised its potential and the urgency to care for it, drawing on his expertise as a biologist and his talent as an artist, while opening a discussion on two paradigms rooted in Tuscany's Renaissance art: perspective and the artist as genius.

Art enables the conception of tools and models that can give us a better understanding of the world and how it works. Tuscany was the birthplace of perspective, one of the most sophisticated artistic devices. It is a method of representation that has radically transformed our knowledge of the world, impacting both art and mapmaking as it allows us to transpose three-dimensional reality onto the two-dimensional surface of paper or canvas. As highlighted by geographer Franco Farinelli (*Blinding Polyphemus: Geography and the Models of the World*, Seagull Books, 2016), this innovation rendered a given area of land measurable and intelligible, as well as easier to control. In the late 15th century, cartography permitted the systematic organisation of transoceanic voyages, paving the way for modernity understood as the encounter between European and non-European cultures. This development laid the foundations for centuries of exploitation of the latter by the former through colonialism, which plundered resources, perpetrated violence on the invaded populations, and created the preconditions for technological and industrial revolutions. Through perspective, Leon Battista Alberti made our eyes the central element in our relationship with the world. A world that is knowable and manageable on a human scale. A fast-paced world where today's road and rail connections allow us to treat a territory as a space to be traversed from one point to another.

Farinelli, who focused on the centrality of perspective in shaping the model of modernity, also explained that we now live in a world whose logic can no longer be represented by the cartographic image. The internet, financial flows and the underground wiring that lets us connect distant lands and transport information and materials are all invisible elements that force us to deal with systems that challenge the notion of space as measurable and functional in the same way as before. The map must be replaced with the globe, and this is the dimension that Scoccianti explores.

Artlands represents the desire to re-establish a preindustrial landscape through artistic interventions without negating the presence of what has been constructed in recent centuries. In this landscape, ecosystems are the key players: symbiotic relationships with the environments, transient species, migratory and water flows, and the breeding seasons of non-sedentary animals. Scoccianti's interventions are never intended only for humans but rather for a community of living beings, not ones that simply end up sharing an area, and not just a space. *Artlands* activates all the body's senses to produce a unique experience of the Arno Valley, which is often disregarded for being so different from the more stereotypical Tuscan landscape of cypresses and vineyards.

Scoccianti's ecosystem is open and consists of a series of works that serve as prototypes, concepts that can be reinterpreted elsewhere and influenced by the action of atmospheric conditions, as well as by the animals and insects that take refuge there. He has brought these ideas to life with the help of friends and volunteers and thanks to the contribution of the Regional Council of Tuscany and the WWF. With bulldozers and other machinery, he has created observation areas overlooking reconstructed landscapes based on those of preindustrial times. Scoccianti conceived these works to set aside areas that would welcome various species of wild flora and fauna, but also as a way to protect the animals from hunters. This "porosity" in organising the production of *Artlands'* installations is characteristic of coming together and generating a collective vision. The intention is to clear the land of polluting waste, make

it inviting and bring humans into proximity with the different species that occupy it throughout the year. A series of viewing stations allow visitors to admire these landscapes, their seasonal changes and the life that inhabits them without causing a disturbance. The project has aesthetic value in rethinking potential landscapes from the past as we have known them through works of art. But it also goes beyond the tendency of Land Art, which is primarily an anthropocentric gesture created within an area often erroneously considered wild. Since the 1960s, site-specific art has incorporated practices that seek to establish a relationship with the area where it is installed. Scoccianti engages the tradition of collective processes to create a space for interspecies care. Rather than the figure of the artist-genius, he adopts that of a connector of energies, economies and thinking – a collaborative endeavour.

The reactivation of the perception of a landscape's past perfectly fits the metaphor of the globe that we are faced with today, as Farinelli again reminds us. The rectilinear nature of a map, where one can ideally proceed in a straight line forever, is contrasted with the opposing movement around a sphere, where everything that we leave behind us will eventually reappear in front of us as we return to our point of departure. In *Artlands*, the present and past coexist and their temporality is brought back to life. Today, when one climbs the hill, after visiting Scoccianti's works and the viewing areas he has created, one catches sight of the Arno Valley, the skyline of the city of Prato, its mountains, the ponderous tollgates of the motorway and the criss-crossing lanes of its concrete junctions. Continuing on the high ground, we leave this slice of contemporary life behind, and, in a kind of final apotheosis of a journey of initiation, from the summit of the hill we instead see *Artlands* stretching out before us in all its complexity and visible silence, in all its essence suspended in the age-old and present-day time of the globe.

For the first time in a single volume, this publication gathers and presents

Scoccianti's installations along with interventions by other artists in various disciplines who have reflected on *Artlands* over the years, a truly one-of-a-kind collective experience. The Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art has hosted various conferences that have inspired these interventions. *Artlands* represents something unprecedented in the region, a bold endeavour that brings together botany, architecture and art to produce new ecosystems. We at the Foundation for Contemporary Arts in Tuscany consider it a model of synergy among organisations that is destined to grow in the future.

Stefano Collicelli Cagol
Director of the Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art, Prato

Artlands. The Art of Creating Landscapes

“The *Artlands* project,” in the words of its creator Carlo Scoccianti, “aims to foster novel criteria for artistic and design interventions linked to the landscape and ecology of places.”

Involving various international experts in artistic and environmental culture, between autumn 2012 and spring 2013 the project inaugurated a rich programme of public meetings held at the Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art in Prato. Also connected to on-site visits, the encounters sought to identify “new forms of constructing the territory” on the Piana Fiorentina alluvial plain between Campi Bisenzio, Sesto Fiorentino and Prato, and on both banks of the Arno River, in the towns of Signa and Lastra a Signa, as is well documented in this book.

The multi-year initiative and this first publication highlight the commitment of biologist Carlo Scoccianti. Since 1996, he has been the originator and driving force of a series of operations to construct natural ecosystems on a regional and national level. As such, he is the designer and coordinator of a large group of people including local administrators, specialists, professionals and numerous volunteers. Engaged in a variety of ways, these individuals are all united by their interest in safeguarding the landscape and preserving nature, with a particular reference to the wetlands in the metropolitan area between Florence and Prato.

Promoted by the WWF of the Florentine area, which manages this network of new places, curated by architect Marco Brizzi and organised by Image, the programme of encounters initiated in 2012 with the name *Artlands* boasts the collaboration of many public and private entities including the province of Florence (now the Metropolitan City of Florence); the University of Florence; the Florence Academy of Fine Arts; the municipalities of Campi Bisenzio, Signa and Lastra a Signa; three of the plain’s land-reclamation consortiums (recently brought together as the Consorzio di Bonifica Medio Valdarno); and the companies Quadrifoglio (now Alia Servizi Ambientali SpA), Publiacqua SpA and L’Isola dei Renai SpA.

The publication of *Artlands* is sponsored by the Luigi Pecci Centre (transformed into the Foundation for Contemporary Arts in Tuscany), and by the City of Prato’s Urban Center, and has been made possible thanks to the con-

tribution of the Tuscany Regional Council within the regional project “Toscanaincontemporanea 2022”. Containing reflections and considerations that have been developed over the past decade, this book comprehensively documents the originality of Scoccianti’s research, which is both aesthetic and ecological and lies in a domain shared by science, architecture and contemporary art. For the first time, the landscape is no longer an object serving as the material background for environmental works or installations (Land Art). Neither is it the physical context for architectural projects or a compliment for new architectures. Rather, with its large dimensions and features, the landscape itself is the subject that becomes the artwork (Artlands).

As well as a biologist, Scoccianti is a WWF activist, eco-artist, landscapist and intellectual. With his constant passion and untiring work, he not only gives these interventions aesthetic value, but also ecological, social, cultural and public importance. While the municipal administrations involved and the Consorzio di Bonifica Medio Valdarno are the supporters who physically carry out his projects, the direct participation of the WWF certifies the work’s “green” character and sustainable framework. The interventions on an environmental scale, which Scoccianti calls “work-sites”, are in fact: 1) artworks, in so far as they are inventions, projects and designs of new landscapes; 2) actions of political management, land reclamation and hydraulic engineering for the creation and conservation of wetlands; 3) natural areas restored to new life, as habitats for flora and fauna, spaces subject to seasonal and multi-year dynamics. In short, they are auteur ecosystems, paradoxical places conceived to counter reckless polluting anthropisation, and to propose a nature that is renewed by human intervention. Scoccianti gives each intervention a title, which identifies it as a distinct work and yet in a state of becoming, perhaps a unique case of an artwork/auteur action in the process of accomplishment.

Today, *Artlands* constitutes an extraordinary achievement and an outstanding collective heritage of cultural, artistic, natural and landscape interest in this part of Tuscany. It is offered to the public as an innovative union, or a fascinating short circuit, between art and environment. The environment as art.

Regional Council of Tuscany



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