

The Los Angeles Urban Rangers: actualizing geographic thought

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Nicholas Bauch

California State University, Los Angeles, USA

Emily Eliza Scott

Faculty of Arts, VU University Amsterdam, with the Métamatic Research Initiative, the Netherlands

Abstract

The Los Angeles Urban Rangers (LAUR) is one of a growing number of collectives associated with the art world that offer new methods for expressing and performing insights rooted in geographical thought. Borrowing the US National Park Service ranger ‘persona,’ the LAUR demonstrate a number of ways to untangle nature-society issues in cities. The ranger persona is successful in part because of its ability to spatially relocate the affect associated with (supposed) pristine nature to urban places. The article contains a toolkit of programs that the LAUR have employed to re-activate urban space.

Keywords

contemporary art, critical environmentalism, Los Angeles, performance, public space, tours, urban exploration

Introduction

In the last decade, a number of groups situated within the art world have begun to challenge and expand what it is that geographers might do, offering new and unexpected ways they might practice. The best-known example, perhaps, is the Center for Land Use Interpretation, an organization that has produced a vast body of (unorthodox yet widely used) research on ‘how the nation’s lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived’ in the form of site-specific tours, exhibitions, printed publications, and an online database. Meanwhile, in New York City, the Center for Urban Pedagogy creates ‘visually-based educational tools that demystify urban policy and planning issues,’¹

Corresponding author:

Nicholas Bauch, Department of Geosciences & Environment, California State University, Los Angeles, 5151 State University Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90032, USA
Email: nbbauch@calstatela.edu

frequently working with public schools and other official institutions to expand their reach. Outside the US,² collectives such as the Bureau d'Etudes, multiplicity, and Raqs Media Collective have taken up issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian border, ship piracy in the Mediterranean, and networks of corporate outsourcing. These artist ensembles showcase, perform, and/or attempt to remedy a variety of social and environmental issues, sometimes by physically intervening in the places from which they can be read.

In this article we offer an insider's perspective of one of these entities – the Los Angeles Urban Rangers (LAUR) – to explore how this nascent strain of art is adding tools to the ways that geographers can *express* their insights and findings as well as extend them to publics beyond the academy. We are both active members of the LAUR, and through this – alongside more official academic pursuits – have invested years in creating ways to translate complex nature-society relationships in Los Angeles into interactive, place-based, educational, and cost-free public programming. By professional background, our group is comprised of a geographer, a public artist, an architect, a non-profit consultant, an environmental historian, and an art historian. We have been working together in various constellations since 2004.³

Our methods

As our name suggests, the distinguishing characteristic of our group is its adoption of the US National Park Service (NPS) ranger persona. We deploy this persona – specifically its disarming personality and on-the-ground know-how – to spur creative-critical investigations of urban space, on topics ranging from the US Interstate Highway System, to the LA River, to public beach access in Malibu, to homelessness in downtown Los Angeles.

Already known to most, the NPS is a land management agency within the US Department of the Interior that oversees the planning, maintenance, programming, and protection of national parks, monuments, historic sites and other designated NPS lands. And those who carry out the work there (e.g. enforcing regulations, leading hikes, managing wildlife, rescuing injured visitors) are called rangers. Many of the nation's most iconic locations – Yosemite, Joshua Tree, Grand Canyon, the Everglades – are managed by the NPS. Our group is founded on this fundamental question: what happens when we transport the figure of the NPS ranger to intensely urban settings? NPS rangers typically work in places that have resulted from a long-standing American attachment to the myth of pristine nature, while we LAUR 'range' places that represent their supposed antithesis. At each stage in designing our programs, we bear in mind the re-contextualization of this persona from his traditional environment in nature to that of the city. We are keenly interested in how the categories of nature and city – often perceived as binary opposites – are employed in popular discourse, and how this polarization has hindered efforts to reform places like Los Angeles into more sustainable and equitable environments.

Our official mission statement is to 'develop guided hikes, campfire talks, field kits, and other interpretive tools to spark creative explorations of everyday habitats, in our home megalopolis and beyond.'⁴ As mission statements are wont to be, ours is packed with an odd blend of vagueness and precision. We do indeed develop guided hikes for places in Los Angeles (and occasionally more distant locales), and we do fabricate maps, guides, field kits, and other devices that encourage investigations of mundane surroundings.

Yet, arriving at our website without prior knowledge of who we are, one might upon first glance be utterly confused. Terms like 'campfire talks' and 'everyday habitats' are juxtaposed with 'home megalopolis' and 'freeway landscapes.' While this language is used connotatively (e.g. campfire talks are akin to informal round-table discussions) and often with a dose of irony, it also probes our concern about how we have been culturally conditioned to code landscapes with

moral weight. What, for instance, if we begin looking at cities in parallel to how we look at nature? What if ‘everyday habitats’ stops functioning connotatively altogether, and becomes instead the way we fundamentally view and name the places in our urban lives? At base, our programs force participants to grapple with the moral coding that sees nature as ‘pure’ and the city as ‘fallen.’ We (implicitly) teach people through our programming that we have been culturally trained to see and care about nature in a way that assumes its superiority. If we transplant this assumption – that nature is our moral compass – to urban places, it is easier to take personal responsibility for political-ecological problems there in the same way that traditional environmentalism has taught us to care about wilderness.⁵ We believe one compelling component of our programs is an underlying, useful contradiction. Specifically, we disabuse participants of a strictly territorialized vision of pristine nature, while using its associated affect of stewardship in urban space.

One way to articulate this genre of care for urban landscapes is through the phrase *spatial relocation of affect*. That is, the ranger persona spatially relocates the cultural and moral assumptions that are often reserved for ‘nature’ and instead enacts them in urban places. The ranger persona transports through space an affect that has habitually only been incited *in places* that offer scenic overlooks, wayside photo points, outdoor recreation, or encounters with non-human life. It is important to emphasize that this relocation of affect is not done explicitly by the LAUR, but rather, through the act of performing ranger-ness.

Our practice of remodeling traditional modernist categories is in concert with the ocean of work in human geography that has been influenced by post-structuralism.⁶ That is, our practice upsets the handed-down ontological categories of nature and culture. The acting out of this categorical disruption is the *sin non qua* of our identity. Surprisingly, this is not to say that all of our programs exclusively or explicitly address environmental issues. Instead, the ranger persona functions like an open gate. It invites participants to start looking at the city with fresh eyes – with the same level of awe and curiosity that visitors often bring to national parks.

The genus of the ranger does much of the work in transforming what might otherwise appear to be banal observations into profound realizations about the environmental, legal, and cultural histories of Los Angeles, and their implications for the remaking of urban space. But, how and why exactly does this work? Now eight years into the LAUR project, we are still discovering new facets of the ranger character; for instance, how her ‘down-to-earth’ and hospitable nature can be effective in disarming audiences and stimulating substantive exchanges about controversial spatial issues.

This hinges on the fact that the NPS ranger is a widely recognized, even archetypal, figure in American culture. Stereotypically at least, rangers are alert defenders of the public trust, possess factual knowledge about the places where they are posted, and are reliable, friendly, honest, and eager to share their dorky enthusiasm with anyone who cares to listen.⁷ In performing these attributes, we signify to participants in our programs – via tone, word choice, dress, and body language – that they are not with just any tour guides, but with *rangers* – devoted civil servants. Donning the uniform, becoming rangers, has afforded us the opportunity to interrupt space, to remake it in a radically different vision of normativity.⁸

Our toolbox

Maps

Maps are one of the devices we use continually because they allow us to concisely re-frame information and/or represent new interpretive overlays of urban space. The first map we created, in

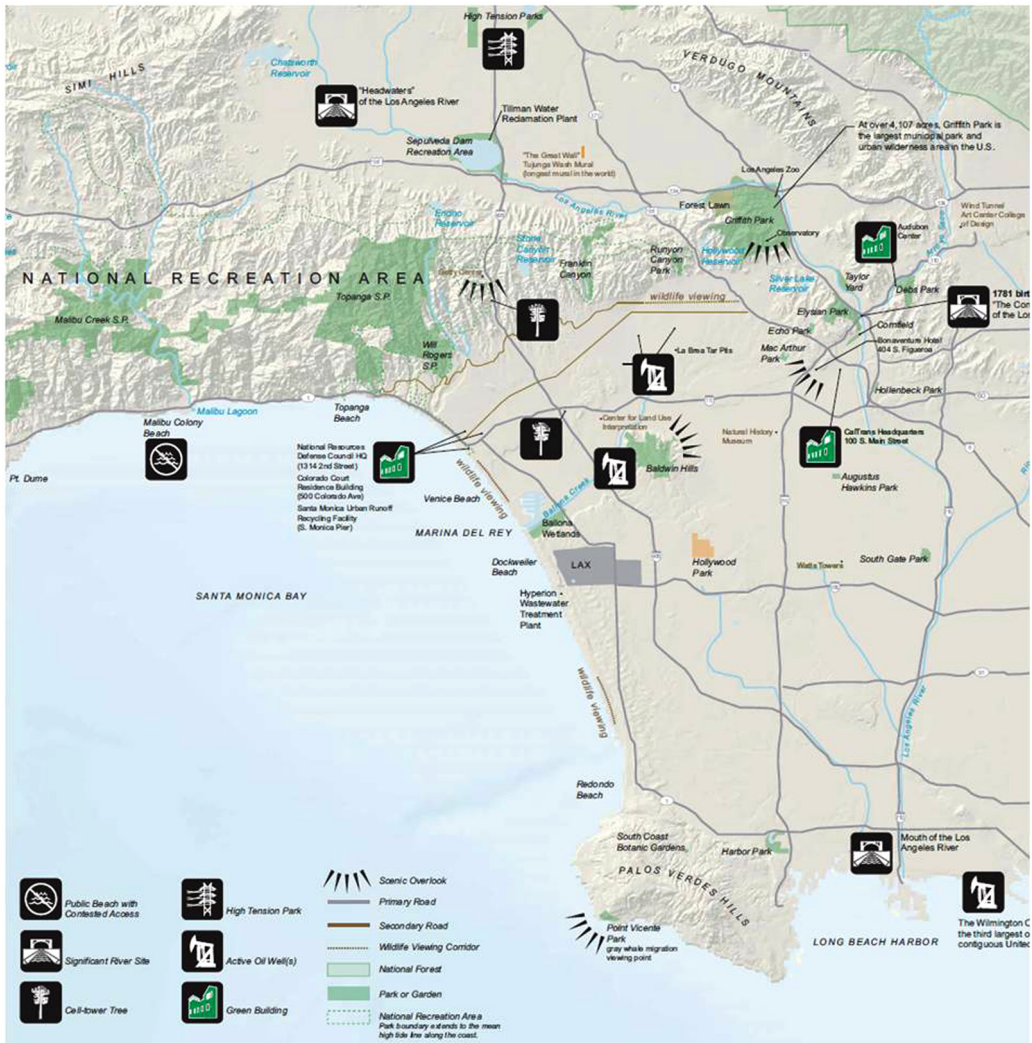


Figure 1. Detail of *Los Angeles Urban Rangers Official Map and Guide* (2004), which mimics the style and format of US National Park Service brochures.

2004, treats LA County as a vast park system and marks out cell-phone towers, active oil wells, and high-speed freeway trails, among other landmarks (see Figure 1).

Therese Kelly, the primary mapmaker in our lot, notes that the medium allows us to ‘make visual many of the invisible or overlooked systems and infrastructures at play in our urban landscape’ and is ‘not only a tool for documenting space, but also . . . to create new spatial relationships that may not have existed before.’⁹ Additionally, maps possess a different temporality than events, so often serve as a residue of our programming – an archive-able keepsake for participants – not to mention a means to disseminate our work to broader audiences over time. Of course, producing maps is also part and parcel of our mimicry of the NPS and its signature guides, with their unmistakable black band, Helvetica font, geological diagrams, wildlife photographs, and safety tips.

Field kits

All of our projects prioritize participation, and specifically, encourage people to become more engaged in the places around them, whether by way of small acts of discovery or heightened involvement in local spatial politics. One way we do this is to foreground interactive exercises in our works. For example, in conjunction with a 2006 project on the Interstate Highway System, we devised a field kit and guide for road trippers, meant to facilitate sharpened observational skills for reading 21st century roadside geographies, particularly in light of the ever-increasing standardization of the American landscape. (The interstates themselves—characterized by consistent speeds, straightened corridors, limited access points, and repetitive models of urban development and architectural design—are emblematic.) A customizable specimen collection system, windshield framing device, field observation log, madlibs, car mapping exercise, photo games (e.g. one where users seek out thresholds such as ‘city & non-city,’ ‘east & west’), and other activities were together aimed to interrupt a passive, ‘scenic viewpoint’ mode of tourism (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. *Interstate Road Trip Specialist Field Kit (2006).* Produced in conjunction with the *Interstate: American Road Trip* exhibition at High Desert Test Sites in Joshua Tree, California, and Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, New York.

PHOTOGRAPHIC SCAVENGER HUNTS

SPATIAL SENSATIONS

sublime	iconic	claustrophobic
nostalgic	authentic	futuristic
expansive	melancholic	spectacular

Figure 3. Photographic Scavenger Hunt activity from *Interstate Road Trip Specialist Field Guide* (2006), which prompts users to seek out and give image to ‘spatial sensations’ as they traverse the landscape. Produced in conjunction with the *Interstate: American Road Trip* exhibition at High Desert Test Sites in Joshua Tree, California, and Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, New York.

Guided hikes

The guided hike is our staple tool, reflecting our belief in the power of on-site activity to integrate meaningful insights with actual places. The complexity of any given place on one of our hikes is by no means readily apparent upon first glance. Indeed, this is part of what we intend to illustrate. Yet we show participants that much can be gleaned by creative, collective looking, and that place-based experiences form a strong starting point for interpreting the contemporary, urban landscape. Our longest-running project, *Malibu Public Beaches* (2007–10), highlighted long-standing territorial battles along Malibu’s coastline, where 20 of 27 total miles of beachfront are lined with high-dollar private development that largely bars public access. The crux of our project was a series of ‘safaris,’ which we offered dozens of times over multiple years to a public-space-hungry local citizenry. During these events, participants practiced public space ‘survival skills,’ and specifically, ‘how to find, park, walk, picnic, and sunbathe on a Malibu beach legally and safely.’ After watching Urban Rangers demonstrate how to identify, measure, and stake out this legally complex terrain, safari-goers broke into groups to ‘trail-blaze the public-private boundary’ (see Figures 4 and 5).

Later, they embarked on a ‘no-kill access way hunt,’ competing to find all the public access ways along a given stretch of coastline, many of which have been camouflaged by imposing ‘no entry’ signs, driveways, and various other forms of defensive architecture. In a final activity, they used magnets to add alternative signage, or ‘magnetic public commentary,’ to an un-permitted ‘No Parking’ sign installed at the request of local homeowners near a public coastal access way (see Figure 6).¹⁰

As Ranger Therese Kelly succinctly asserts, ‘Hollywood Boulevard only becomes a trail when people are actually hiking it; the beaches in Malibu only become public once embodied by the public.’¹¹

Conclusion

Returning to the fundamental theme of this journal section – ‘how do cultural geographers practice?’ – we want to re-emphasize that this type of performance brings another mode of expression into the geographical toolkit. It is conceivable that our analyses of urban places and landscapes could be communicated solely through written publications. However, the process of bringing



Figure 4. Rangers Jennifer Price and Ron Milam demonstrate how to locate and demarcate a public easement in Malibu, California. From a *Malibu Public Beaches* safari (2007–10).



Figure 5. Participants on a *Malibu Public Beaches* safari (2007-10) stretch over from a public easement to retrieve a Frisbee from private land without trespassing. The property line is invisible, and can be ascertained only with the aid of California Coastal Commission documents, the California Constitution, and a tape measure.

people to the places we study, and acting out the contestation of territory in situ in Malibu, for instance, teaches people through direct corporeal experience about their city in a way that is impossible from reading alone. The tangled legal, environmental, and social histories that we attempt to clarify require guided, interactive, onsite engagement. In this way geography is activated, and becomes more powerful because we combine the analysis of place with the suggestion to creatively re-imagine urban conditions and problems. Our experience is that participants frequently leave our programs not only more informed about specific issues, but also more empowered to take action in a myriad of ways should they choose to do so.



Figure 6. Sign-making exercise on a *Malibu Public Beaches* safari (2007-10), in which participants were asked to create alternative signage that they would like to see around the public access ways. Photographer: Tom Queally.

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Notes

- 1 Taken from the homepage of the Center for Land Use Interpretation's website: <<http://www.clui.org/>> (23 September 2011).
- 2 Taken from the homepage of the Center for Urban Pedagogy's website: <<http://welcometocup.org/>> (23 September 2011).
- 3 The Los Angeles Urban Rangers are: Nicholas Bauch, Sara Daleiden, Therese Kelly, Ron Milam, Jennifer Price, and Emily Eliza Scott.
- 4 <<http://laurbanrangers.org/>> (4 December 2011).
- 5 The notion of nature operating as a 'moral compass' comes from: W. Cronon, 'Introduction: In search of nature', in W. Cronon, ed., *Uncommon ground: rethinking the human place in nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 36.
- 6 Especially helpful here are: D.P. Dixon and J.P. Jones III, 'Poststructuralism', in J.S. Duncan, N.C. Johnson and R.H. Schein (eds) *A Companion to Cultural Geography* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 83, and: Jonathan Murdoch, *Post-Structuralist Geography: A Guide to Relational Space* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006).
- 7 This list of characteristics is partially based on the work that Therese Kelly and Jennifer Price have done in representing and explaining the LAUR to non-American audiences. Other parts of this analysis draw from: Charles R. Farabee, *National Park Ranger: An American Icon* (Lanham, MD: Roberts Rinehart, 2003).
- 8 D. Thien and J. Pugh, 'Long Beach Gets Radical: Stretching the Spaces of Radical Politics', *Association of Pacific Coast Geographers Yearbook*, 71, 2009, pp. 254–6.
- 9 'Los Angeles Urban Rangers', in S.C. Bancroft, curator, *2010 California Biennial Catalog* (Newport Beach, CA: Orange County Museum of Art, 2011), p. 128.
- 10 Quotes in the description of the Malibu Public Beach Safari are taken from <<http://laurbanrangers.org/>> (4 December 2011).
- 11 'Los Angeles Urban Rangers', p. 128.

Biographical notes

Nicholas Bauch is Assistant Professor at California State University, Los Angeles in the department of Geosciences & Environment. There he teaches political ecology, urban geography, and cultural geography. His two current writing projects are an historical geography of biotechnologies, and a geography of Internet infrastructures.

Emily Eliza Scott is an interdisciplinary scholar and artist whose work focuses on the creative-critical interpretation of contemlandscapes. In 2010, she completed a PhD in art history at UCLA. Currently a Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Arts, VU University Amsterdam, she is co-editing an anthology on contemporary art and land use politics as well as collaborating with an international team of artists and theorists on a multimedia research platform about global resource circulation.

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