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CHAPTER 39

ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

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THE rapid growth of concern for the natural environment over the last third of the twentieth century has brought the welcome reintroduction of nature as a significant topic in aesthetics. In virtue of transforming previous attitudes towards nature, environmentalist thinking has posed questions about how we conceptualize our aesthetic interactions with nature, the aesthetic value of nature, and the status of art about nature. Although environmental concerns have undoubtedly motivated the new aesthetic interest in nature, the term 'environmental aesthetics' connotes two overlapping but distinct themes, one emphasizing the aesthetics of nature as understood by environmentalism, the second focusing on the notion of environments of all sorts as objects of appreciation.

First, the environmental roots. Beginning in the romantic era, poets and painters began to represent nature as more than merely the backdrop of human enterprise and drama. Nature began to be seen as comprising landscapes compelling in their own wild beauty and objects valuable in their smallest natural detail. Writing later in the nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir in different ways emphasized hands-on interactions with wilderness. In doing so, they introduced the radical notions that wild nature is in many respects superior to civilization and its products, and that harmonious, non-exploitative encounters with it are of transformative value.

To this must be added the Darwinian revolution, locating humans as merely an element within nature rather than masters of it, and the development of ecological thinking: the notion that elements of nature are thoroughly interdependent.

This interrelation of natural elements led Aldo Leopold in the 1940s to formulate the Land Ethic: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold 1966: 240). Leopold's Land Ethic shifts the centre of moral gravity from humans to the larger nature of which they are a part, and it also allots a central place to the aesthetic value of nature.

From this perspective, nature is regarded not as an adversary or resource to be subdued and exploited, but as something with an autonomous and worthy existence in itself. In contrast to prior European attitudes, wilderness is regarded not as ugly or as a blemish on existence, but as something not only admirable, but admirable aesthetically. Indeed, environmental thinkers often indict traditional ways of understanding and regarding nature for being 'anthropocentric'.

The label 'environmental aesthetics' applies naturally to the ensuing wave of investigations of the aesthetics of nature conducted under the influence of environmental concerns. (Berleant 1998 suggests that environmental aesthetics is actually the successor to nature aesthetics.) Also important, however, is a broader use of the label championed by Berleant (1992) and Carlson (1992), who use it to cover aesthetic investigation of our experience of all sorts of environments, man-made as well as natural. This broader category of environmental aesthetics incorporates such diverse fields as city planning, landscape architecture, and environmental design, and it is significant because, whether applied to nature or built environments, it directly challenges the object-at-a-distance model associated with standard theories in aesthetics. That said, the majority of new work that falls notionally under this broader definition of environment grows out of concerns about nature instigated by environmentalism, and it concentrates on natural environments. Accordingly, most of the work to be explored in this chapter will be of this specific sort. As Berleant acknowledges, 'An interest in the aesthetics of environment is part of a broader response to environmental problems... and to public awareness and action on environmental issues' (1992: xii).

In environmental thinking and the attendant interest in environments in the broad sense, some thinkers see implications for the general practice of aesthetics, a discipline that in the twentieth century persistently ignored nature in favour of theories based on the arts. Environmental thinking, however, has begun to place strain on the assumption that aesthetic concepts drawn from the arts are also adequate to nature and to everyday life.

1. The Aesthetic Value of Nature

Although beauty has been out of fashion in the high arts throughout much of the twentieth century, most people happily view and describe nature as beautiful.

Indeed, whereas disagreement about the aesthetic quality of artworks is commonplace, typically there is less disagreement about ascribing positive aesthetic qualities, such as beauty or grandeur, to individual objects (Siberian tigers) and places (Grand Canyon) in nature. What *is* accepted without question about artworks as a class (setting aside the avant-garde) is that they have *value*. Further, it is natural to think of this value as a *non-instrumental*, i.e. intrinsic, value. For instance, we do not lightly contemplate destroying art even if it would be convenient or profitable—indeed, even if preservation comes at a considerable cost.

Environmentalist thinking impacts aesthetics precisely in the thought that nature should be treated in the same way. Hargrove (1989) and Thompson (1995), for example, have noted that we value artworks as a class and accept obligations concerning their preservation. They do not regard this valuation as an arbitrary convention; the various aesthetic properties and meanings possessed by artworks give them an aesthetic value deriving from these aesthetic features. Hargrove and Thompson argue that nature is similarly valuable and worthy of preserving because of its aesthetic qualities. Thompson urges that, just as we accept an obligation to preserve beautiful artworks, we have obligations to preserve aesthetically valuable nature areas. (For a critique of such aesthetic preservationism see Godlovitch 1989.) Thompson also claims that the same sort of critical and evaluative discourse that applies to the arts appropriately applies to nature; the same patterns of reasoning that lead us to conclude that artworks have high aesthetic quality can be applied to parts of nature. It is not only that there are beautiful details and magnificent and rich structures in nature, but also that, like art, natural objects and sites can provide challenges to our conventional ways of perception, as well as to cultural significance, connection with the past, and so forth.

Because it plays a key role in preservationist arguments, aesthetic value is a more consequential concept in environmental aesthetics than it is in contemporary art aesthetics. Artworks as a class are regarded in modern society as having little instrumental value; they have no other use than to be appreciated. But nature clearly is another story. Humans, modern or not, need to exploit many aspects of nature, and we have the capacity thoroughly to develop almost all of it, if we choose. Nature, in short, has great instrumental value. If, as aesthetic preservationists argue, the aesthetic value of undeveloped nature ought to restrain our use of it for resource extraction, industry, recreation, etc., then aesthetic value has to bear significant weight.

Preservationist reasoning implies that the aesthetic value of undeveloped or wild nature is superior to that of developed nature. For example, an artificial lake will not possess the aesthetic value of the valleys or canyons that were flooded to make it, even though superficially it may be attractive. This suggests that it is unlikely that mere formal features (shapes, colours, reflecting surfaces, etc.) will fully account for the aesthetic value of nature. But what then needs to be added to formal properties, and where and how do we draw the line between nature (canyon) and artefact (lake)?

Environmentalist thinkers find difficulty with treatments of aesthetic value simply in terms of pleasure (as in Beardsley 1982). Brady (1998) classifies such approaches as

'hedonist models' of aesthetic appreciation. She says that the 'hedonist model classifies aesthetic value as a type of amenity value, where nature is valued for the aesthetic pleasure that it provides to inhabitants or visitors' (p. 97). She argues that such an emphasis on subjective pleasure will not support the conservation of a natural area as against, for instance, a potentially colourful recreational development. As an alternative, she proposes that an updated version of Kantian disinterestedness—with its eschewal of self-interest and utility—provides a better account of the aesthetic stance appropriately underpinning appreciation of nature. (For critiques of disinterestedness applied to nature appreciation, see Berleant 1992; Miller 1993.)

Clearly, then, environmental thinkers have to account for the difference between authentic or wild nature and an artificial nature that might be perceptually similar. Accordingly, the notion of indiscernible counterparts plays a key role in environmental aesthetics, just as it has in recent art aesthetics, where philosophers (e.g. Walton, Danto, Levinson, Currie) have used examples of indiscernible objects one of which is an artwork and the other of which is a different artwork or no artwork at all to argue against the idea that the status and the aesthetic qualities of artworks are determined solely by their inherent perceptual properties. For nature, the aesthetic difference between perceptually similar states of affairs becomes practically important in the context of restoration ecology, the field that proposes to restore or recreate natural areas that have been degraded by human development (see Elliot 1997). Regardless of whether this is biologically possible, the aesthetic question is whether nature can be exploited—e.g. by mining—and then restored to its original state with similar aesthetic qualities.

The first question is whether one can appreciate an artefactualized segment of 'nature' as if it were natural. Carlson (1981) considers the difference between a natural coastline and a hypothetical one that is perceptually indistinguishable but created by removal of structures, large-scale earth, rock and sand movement, landscaping with similar plants, and so on. He argues that these two coastlines should be perceived differently, one as an artefact, the other as a natural coastline. Although they may have similar curves, lines, colours and shapes, he asserts that we properly ascribe many different second-order properties to these similar perceptual patterns. For example, the curve of one coast is *very ingenious*, whereas the curve of the natural coast is no such thing, but rather is the product of erosion by the sea. On the other hand, perhaps the natural coast *expresses the power of the sea*, whereas the artefact coast does no such thing. Carlson concludes that, because we are led to ascribe different properties to the object, it is aesthetically important to perceive an object under the category to which it belongs, as either an artefact or the product of natural forces, just as it is aesthetically important to perceive an artwork in its true art historical category (cf. Walton 1970).

It is natural to suppose that the aesthetic *value* of an item increases with its aesthetic *quality*. Applying this relation to nature seems to imply that some parts of nature have greater aesthetic value than other parts. Some thinkers (e.g. Thompson 1995) accept this, but many others reject the idea that nature can be aesthetically evaluated and ranked in a way parallel to artworks.

A common view among environmental thinkers is that dubbed 'positive aesthetics' by Allen Carlson. The strongest version of this position holds that all virgin nature is beautiful (Carlson 1984: 10). A weaker formulation is that the 'natural environment, in so far as it is untouched by man, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is, for example, graceful, delicate, intense, unified, and orderly, rather than bland, dull, insipid, incoherent, and chaotic' (Carlson 1984: 5). The weaker version clearly does not entail that all parts of nature are equally beautiful, and so it may leave undefended the claim implied by the stronger version: namely, that we cannot maintain that one part of nature is aesthetically superior to another part. The proponent of positive aesthetics rejects conventional aesthetic hierarchies concerning nature—e.g., majestic mountain *v.* bland prairie *v.* dank swamp. Although the aesthetic evaluation of artworks may vary from great to mediocre to poor, and their qualities from beautiful to boring to ugly, this is exactly what is different about nature, according to positive aesthetics.

Positive aesthetics can be understood as the result of two intuitions. First, that aesthetic assessment of art involves criticism, judgement and ultimately *comparison*. But such comparative judgements are appropriate only for artefacts, which are intended to be a certain way or to accomplish certain goals, not for nature. Second, our tendency to find some parts of nature bland, boring, or even distasteful are all based on projecting *inappropriate* ideas or comparisons on to the objects of our experience, for example looking for a view of nature that is similar to a beautifully framed and balanced art representation, or looking at a dark forest as full of evil spirits. Nature properly understood—that is, against a background of biology, geology, and ecology—is, as a matter of fact beautiful, or at least aesthetically good, in many ways.

As Callicott notes, paraphrasing Leopold, knowledge of the ecological relationships between the organisms, the evolutionary and geological history, and so forth can transform a marsh 'from a "waste", "God-forsaken" mosquito swamp, into a thing of precious beauty' (Callicott 1987: 162). We see that the marsh is a thing of beauty when we appreciate it as the habitat of the sandhill crane, when we understand that the cranes originated in distant geological ages, when we understand the intricate interrelations of all of the organisms in the marsh, and so on. Conversely, superficially attractive but non-native plants and animals may be seen as disharmonious interlopers that undermine the balance of nature. (For a sympathetic critique of positive aesthetics, see Godlovitch 1998.)

2. Environmentalism and the Appreciation of Nature

Of the many questions that environmentalist claims give rise to, perhaps none is more fundamental than the question whether nature can be appropriately appreciated with

the same methods and assumptions with which we appreciate art. The model of appreciation at the heart of standard art aesthetics is roughly this: it is an interpretive judgement of a demarcated object based on a conventionally circumscribed perception of it. Environmentally inclined aestheticians have found difficulty with many aspects of this model. The environmental tradition gives rise to a preference for a more active relationship with, and within, a natural world of interconnected elements. These points lead to the notion (Carlson 1979; Berleant 1992) that environmental appreciation (*a*) is typically a physically active interaction, (*b*) involves integrated and self-conscious use of all the senses, including touch and smell (Tuan 1993), and (*c*) does not privilege any one vantage point or small set of vantage points as the correct place from which to experience the natural setting or objects.

Are these conditions sufficient for aesthetic experience of nature (or any environment)? If so, then would any self-conscious interaction with nature, e.g. pleasurably basking in the sun, be an aesthetic experience? If not, then what more needs to be added? Carlson (1979) argues that the further feature required is that one's sensory interaction be guided by commonsense/scientific knowledge about nature. Without this cognition, our experience is a blooming, buzzing confusion; but with such science-based cognition our raw experience acquires determinate centres of aesthetic significance and is made harmonious and meaningful.

Another question stimulated by the environmentalist model is whether an aesthetic response to a natural environment is, as in conventional aesthetics, in essence a perceptual–judgemental one, or whether it can be an *action*, such as rock climbing, hiking, or Thoreauvian digging and planting beans. An example of an action or series of actions that are usually regarded as highly aesthetic occurs in the Japanese tea ceremony, where respect for the utensils, ingredients, and the nature setting of the tea house is an integral part of the ceremony, and one of the basic goals of the ceremony is to exemplify harmony between the host and the setting. Even such examples, however, exhibit highly refined perception as an integral component of the actions. So, one could propose that in general actions can be aesthetic if, first of all, they are responses *to* objects and situations, and second, the response is founded upon an aesthetic perception of the situation.

Carlson's (1979, 1981) science-based model of aesthetic appreciation of nature (extended by Carlson, 1985, to all environments) has received considerable attention. For instance, Saito (1984) questions the necessity, and Rolston (1995) the sufficiency, of a science-based appreciation of nature such as Carlson advocates. Carroll further argues that there are alternatives to Carlson's picture, insisting that an emotional response to nature 'can be an appropriate form of nature appreciation' (Carroll 1993: 253) and that such a response need not be based on scientific knowledge: it could simply involve, say, being overwhelmed by the grandeur of 'a towering cascade'. Carroll thus proposes a pluralist model that allows as one sort of legitimate aesthetic appreciation of nature a kind of response that, although based on perception of salient natural features, is not grounded in scientifically informed perception.

The main argument for a science-based appreciation of nature is that we require an objective basis for appreciating nature as it truly is, not as we wish it or fear it to be, and that science is our best procedure for understanding nature objectively. Godlovitch (1994) finds that this argument does not go far enough. He emphasizes the environmentalist desideratum that we regard nature 'as it is and not merely as it is for us' (p. 16). Accordingly, he claims that a 'natural aesthetic must forswear the anthropocentric limits which fittingly define and dominate our aesthetic response to and regard for cultural objects' (p. 16). He argues that even science is too much a reflection of human sensibilities to constitute the basis of a true environmentalist aesthetic, which would be *acentric*, privileging no point of view, least of all a human one: 'Centric [e.g. anthropocentric and biocentric] environmentalism fails to reflect Nature as a whole because Nature is apportioned and segmented by it' (p. 17). But is it possible for us to adopt a regard of nature that eschews human perspectives, and if it is, can we still regard this as involving aesthetic appreciation?

3. Environmental Art?

Nature art has obviously been a key factor in a general increase of appreciation of wild nature and in the growth of environmentalism—witness the importance of nature photography to the efforts of conservation groups. There is a certain irony, then, in the fact that environmentalist arguments concerning how we ought to appreciate nature threaten to undermine the legitimacy of nature art and to raise questions as well about other sorts of art about nature.

Within the generic category of art *about* nature, we can define the familiar genre of 'nature art' as representations of nature in any art medium—principally, literature and the visual arts—that have nature, not humans, as their main subject. In addition, nature art is usually thought of as exhibiting the same favourable regard to nature as positive aesthetics; even fierce, barren, or threatening landscapes are presented as being admirable or as having positive aesthetic features.

Although nature art inspires appreciation of nature, does it reflect the aesthetics of nature as environmental aesthetics understands it? One aspect of this broad question can be stated as follows: can works of nature art *exhibit or represent* the aesthetic qualities of the nature represented?

Carlson (1979) gives an influential argument—endorsed by Callicott (1987), Carroll (1993), and Godlovitch (1994)—for rejecting the 'object' and 'landscape' models of nature appreciation, which appears relevant to the question of aesthetic adequacy. Based on art appreciation, these models involve looking at objects in nature for their formal and expressive qualities, abstracting them from their context as if

they were sculpture, or framing and perceiving sites as if in a landscape painting. Carlson argues that neither of these methods respects the actual nature of nature. To appreciate nature as nature, we must regard nature as an *environment* (in the broad sense) and as *natural*, but not as art. This means that we cannot, as in the object model, remove objects from their environments. If we remove them, even notionally, we change their aesthetic qualities, which the objects have only in relation to the whole environment. For example, a rock considered by itself may lack the qualities that it has in nature, where it is related to the forces that shaped it (glaciation, volcanism, erosion). The problem with the landscape model is that it involves perceiving nature 'as a grandiose prospect seen from a specific standpoint and distance' (Carlson 1979: 131). Carlson describes appreciating nature this way as dividing nature up into blocks of scenery to be viewed from a certain vantage point, 'not unlike a walk through a gallery of landscape paintings' (p. 132). But, as he notes, 'the environment is not a scene, not a representation, not static, and not two-dimensional' (p. 133).

Yet, if this is the wrong way to experience nature aesthetically, can we experience nature aesthetically (albeit indirectly) or experience the aesthetic properties of nature through appreciating nature art? Carlson's argument raises the question whether we can experience the beauty of a natural environment by appreciating the beauty of a photograph of that environment. However, might not nature art exhibit how a part of nature actually appeared at a certain moment from a certain point of view? Even though limited and incomplete, why must a representation be seen as necessarily unable authentically to exhibit *some* of the aesthetic qualities of the represented objects or scenes?

Different issues are raised by non-representational art about nature, for instance artworks that incorporate natural objects, sites, or processes as elements. Such features by themselves, of course, do not necessarily determine that an artwork is *about* nature. Some artworks that superficially relate to a natural site, such as sculpture placed in a nature setting (e.g. sculpture parks), as well as works that use natural elements, such as Jeff Koons's 1992 *Puppy* (a 43-foot-high West Highland Terrier form covered with thousands of live flowers), are plainly not *about* nature. Carlson helpfully defines the class of 'environmental artworks' as works that 'are in or on the land in a way such that part of nature constitutes a part of the relevant object... not only is the site of an environmental work an environmental site, but the site itself is an aspect of the work' (1986: 636).

Given the deep divide separating the arts and environmental thought, it is essential to contrast their perspectives concerning this large domain of artefacts. From the perspective of the arts, attention naturally focuses on how to interpret and appreciate environmental works *as art*. What issues about nature and culture does the artist deal with? How does the piece relate to trends in recent art? What attitudes does it express? And so on. For example, Gilbert-Rolfe interprets Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in relation to film: 'In Smithson the idea of the work lies as much in the film of the work as in the work' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1988: 72). And Smithson (1973), as

theorist of earthworks art, interprets Central Park as a landscape inspired by the eighteenth-century picturesque. Finally, Ross proposes that environmental artworks as a class are the descendants of the eighteenth-century high art of gardening, that 'environmental art is *gardening's* avant-garde' (Ross 1993: 153).

There is also the issue of whether gardens and parks, the environments seemingly most intermediate between the arts and nature, are full-fledged artworks. Certainly many examples of both types of artefact have a strong claim to the status of art. Smithson (1973) argues, for example, that New York's Central Park is a great artwork, exemplifying many of the dialectical principles of his own earthworks. Miller urges that gardens constitute an artkind, on a par with painting or sculpture. This is so clear that it leads to a puzzle: 'Why then, if current theories of art show no grounds for excluding them . . . and if gardens have a history of being regarded as an artkind and can be shown to have form as beautiful, as original, and as self-conscious as the other arts, are gardens currently excluded from the category of art?' (Miller 1993: 72). She resolves this by noting the ways that gardens—by their essence tied to particular sites, ever-changing because of the natural elements, etc.—present multiple challenges to standard preferences of art theory, such as for complete artistic control of the work and for consistent qualities of the work over time.

From the perspective of environmental thought, however, with its inherent rejection of any activity or stance that regards nature as something to be used or as something whose purpose is to be determined by cultural perspectives, the issues point in a different direction, towards how environmental artworks deal with nature. Thus, because earthworks since their inception have often inspired opposition from environmentalists, it is not surprising that the question whether environmental artworks are an *affront* to nature has been explored (Carlson 1986). Less severe questions can also be raised, such as whether environmental artworks are based on an adequate conception of nature and whether they enfranchise an appropriate aesthetic relationship with nature. Topiary, for example, is intriguing as an artform. But by imposing artificial (geometric, representational) forms on to natural objects (trees and shrubs) topiary does not illuminate the aesthetic properties of nature as nature: it suggests not only that nature can be improved upon aesthetically, but that nature provides sculptural material to be manipulated and exploited.

Ross (1993) organizes environmental art into seven categories, such as 'masculine gestures in the environment' (Heizer, Smithson, De Maria), 'ephemeral gestures in the environment' (Singer, Long, Fulton, Goldsworthy), and 'proto-gardens' (Sonfist, Irwin). Some of this work is clearly troubling in how it uses and/or regards nature, for example Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969–70)—a 50 ft × 30 ft × 1500 ft bulldozed double cut in Virgin River Mesa, displacing 240,000 tons of rhyolite and sandstone—and Christo's *Surrounded Islands* (1983)—eleven islands in Biscayne Bay surrounded for two weeks by sheets of bright pink plastic floating in the water extended 200 ft from the islands into the Bay.

Carlson (1986) rebuts several common defences of such intrusive artworks, for example that they are temporary (Christo), that they improve nature, or that the artist's actions are no different from the alteration of a site by natural processes (Smithson's argument). In spite of this, there are other works of environmental art, such as Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1965–78), in which the artist attempts to recreate an urban area's lost native flora on a vacant urban lot, that cannot be regarded as affronts to nature, since they do not alter natural aesthetic qualities. Because they respect nature as nature, such works, as well as the conceptual walks and environmental gestures of Long, Fulton, and Goldsworthy, can also be regarded as adequate aesthetically to nature, that is as reflecting nature's actual aesthetic qualities.

Still, there remains a nagging question: can this art contribute to the appreciation of nature? Carlson (1986) wonders why the aesthetic interest in nature can be recognized only if it is first considered art. There seems, in fact, to be a dilemma. Either a work alters nature (e.g. 'masculine gestures'), in which case it may affront and misunderstand nature as nature, or it does not (e.g. 'ephemeral gestures'), in which case what does it add to the appreciation of nature? It might be replied that at least such art leads the viewer to notice aspects of nature that had escaped her attention. But more might be claimed. The arts have always been one way to explore the world and our feelings and ideas about it. Environmental art explores our ideas about nature and our changing relations with it. As such, works may not always express the most environmentally enlightened perspectives, and works in the past—for example formal gardens—probably did not. Still, are inadequate conceptions of nature entirely wrong? Can't there be aspects of nature that are usefully brought out even by such works? In any event, those environmental artworks that do adopt environmentally enlightened perspectives can be viewed as addressing in unique ways questions about how we can interact with nature aesthetically while at the same time respecting nature for what it is.

See also: Aesthetics of Nature; Aesthetics of the Everyday; Comparative Aesthetics; Architecture.

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