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 notion 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 biotic nature of which they are a part, and it also allies 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 invert 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 (1991) and Carlson (1992), who use it to refer to aesthetic investigation of the 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 traditionally under this broader definition of environment grows out of concerns about nature inspired 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: 17).

In environmental thinking and the attendant interest in environments in the broad sense, some thinkers see implications for the general practice of aesthetics in this broader 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 (set 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.

Environmental thinking impacts aesthetics precisely in the thought that nature should be treated in the same way. Langmore (1966) and Thompson (1965), 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. Langmore 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 Godlovich 1986.) 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 perceiving, as well as to cultural significations, connection with the past, and so forth.

Because it plays a key role in preservationist arguments, aesthetic value is a core 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, indeed, 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 so, preservationists argue, the aesthetic value of undeveloped nature ought to restrain our use of it for resource extraction, industry, recreation, etc., 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 artifact (lake)?

Environmentalists find difficulty with treatments of aesthetic value simply in terms of pleasure (as in Beardsley 1984). Brady (1987) classifies such approaches as
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 1995: 40). A weaker formulation is that the natural environment, in so far as it is unmarked by man, has merely positive aesthetic qualities; it is, for example, graceful, delicate, intense, unified, and orderly. Rather than bland, dull, insipid, involved, and chaotic (Carlson 1994: 5). The weaker version clearly does not entail that all parts of nature are equally beautiful, and so it may leave unaddressed the claim implied by the stronger version: namely, that we cannot maintain that one part of nature is aesthetically superior to another part. The proponents of positive aesthetics reject conventional aesthetic hierarchies concerning nature—e.g., majestic mountains, bald prairies, and swampy marshes. 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, judgment and ultimately compassion. But such comparative judgments 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 beautiful, boring, or even distasteful is based on projecting inappropriate ideas or comparisons onto the objects of our experience, e.g. comparing the colors of a flower to the colors of a rose, or the quality of a fruit to the quality of a cherry. As Calvino notes, paraprophrasing Leopold, knowledge of the ecological relationships between the organism, the evolutionary and geological history, and so forth can transform a marsh from a ‘waste’, ‘Gothic brook’, mosquito swamp, into a thing of precious beauty’ (Calvino 1992: 102). 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 changes that originate 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 detrimental to the ecosystem that underpins 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 environmentalists claim 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 judgment of a demarcated object based on a conventionally circumscribed perception of it. Environments 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 (Carson 1979; Bier 1995) 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 (Tian 1905), and (c) does not privilege any 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 appreciated and segmented by it (p. 17). But it is possible for us to adopt a regard for Nature that embraces human perspectives, and if it is, we can 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 environmentalists arguing 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 e.g., scenic beauty, as nature art is appreciated of nature as environmental aesthetics interests? 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?

Carson (1995) gives an influential argument—endorsed by Callcott (1987), Carroll (1995), and Godlovitch (1994)—for rejecting the ‘object’ and ‘landscape’ models of nature appreciation, which appears relevant to the question of aesthetic adequacy. Based on nature 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 silts as if in a landscape painting. Caro-Hirsh argues that these methods respect 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 nationally, we change their aesthetic quality. We lose 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 object model is that it involves experiencing nature as a "gestural" process not a specific viewpoint and distance (caro-Hirsh 1977: 13). Caro-Hirsh describes appreciating nature this way as dividing nature up into blocks of a certain viewpoint, 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 to be experienced (p. 133).

Yet, if this is the way to experience nature aesthetically, can we experience nature-anthropocentrically (albeit indirectly) experience the aesthetic properties of nature through appreciating nature art? Caro-Hirsh argues raises the question whether we can experience the beauty of a natural environment by appreciating the beauty of a photograph of that environment. However, our nature environment as how a part of nature actually appears at a moment from a certain point of view? Even though limited and incomplete, why must a representation be seen as necessarily usable aesthetically to exhibit some of the aesthetic qualities of the represented objects or scenes?

Different issues are raised by non-representation art about nature, for instance, art that incorporates natural objects, sites, or processes as elements. Such features by themselves, of course, do not necessarily determine that an artwork is nature-situated. Some artworks that superficially relate to a natural site, such as sculpture placed in a natural setting (e.g. sculpture parks), as well as works that use natural materials, such as Jeff Noon's 1982 Pappy (a 45-foot-high West Highland Terrier form crowned with thousands of live flowers), are plainly not about nature. Carefully considered the claim of environmental arts' as works that"work" on or on the land in a way that part of nature elucidates a part of the relevant object... not only on the site of the environmental work an environmental site, but the site itself is an aspect of the work" (1986: 456).

Given the deep divide separating the arts and environmental thought, it is essential to contrast their perspectives concerning this large domain of artifacts. From the perspective of the arts, attention naturally focuses on how to integrate and appreciate environmental works so as art. What issues about nature and culture does the artist deal with? How does the price relate to trends in recent art? What attributes does it represent, and so on. For example, Gilbert-Rolle translates Smithson's Spiral Jetty in relation to films. In Smithson's idea of the work lies as much in the film as in the work" (Gibbs-Rolle 1988: 73). And Smithson (1973), as theorist of earthworks art, interprets Central Park as a landscape inspired by the eighteenth-century picturesque. Finally, Rosa promotes that environmental art as a class are the descendants of the eighteenth-century high art of gardening that "environmental art is gardening avant-garde" (Rosa 1993: 35).

There is also the issue of whether gardens and parks, the environments seem, suggest most immediate between the arts and nature, are full-blown artworks. Certainly many examples of both types of artefacts 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 artform, as a part with painting or sculpture. This is no mere that it leads to a puzzle: Why them, if current theories of art show no grounds for excluding them... and if gardens have a history of being regarded as an artform and can be shown to have form as beautiful, as original, and as self-conscious in the other arts, are gardens currently excluded from the category of art?" (Miller 1995: 71). She resolves this by noting the ways that gardens—they are their entire ties to particular sites, even 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 contingent qualities of the work over time.

From the perspective of environmental thought, however, with their inherent rejection of any activity or stance that regards nature as something to be used for something whose purpose 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 responses from environmentalists, it is not surprising that the question whether environmental art are works an affront to nature has been explored (Caro-Hirsh 1986). Less serious questions can also be raised, such as whether environmental artworks are based on an adequate conception of nature and whether they encourage 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) topiaries does not illuminate the aesthetic properties of nature as it suggests not only that nature can be improved upon aesthetically, but that nature provides sculptural material to be manipulated and exploited.

Rosa (1993) organizes environmental art into seven categories, such as: "masculine gestures in the environment" (Heiser, Smithson, De Maria), "euphoric gestures in the environment" (Singer, Long, Fulton, Goldsworthy), and "proto-gardens" (Scully, Irvine). Some of this work is clearly troubling in how it uses and regards nature, for example Heiser’s Double Negative (1970-75)—a 50 ft X 50 ft X 100 ft bulldozed double cut in Virginia River Mesa, displacing 340,000 tons of silverite and sandstone—and Christo’s Surrounded Islands (1980)—eleven islands in Biscayne Bay surrounded for two weeks by sheets of bright pink plastic floating in the water extending 200 ft from the islands into the Bay.
Carlson (1986) rebuts several common defenses of such intrusive artworks, for example that they are temporary (Chirico), 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 Smithson’s Time Landscape (1966-78), 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 week alters nature (e.g. ‘naturalist gestures’), in which case it may affront and misunderstand nature as it is, 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 adequate concepts of nature entirely wrong? Can there be aspects of nature that are useful 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.

Secular Aesthetics of Nature: Aesthetics of the Everyday; Comparative Aesthetics; Architecture.

Bibliography


