

Received: March 3, 2015
Accepted: March 19, 2015
Original scholarly paper
UDC: 7.01:502.22
7.07:502.22

Tanja Plešivčnik

PhD student at the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of Primorska, Koper
tanja.plesivcnik@gmail.com

Impacts of Environmental Discourse on Environmental Art and its Traps

Abstract: The paper examines the field of environmental art and assesses the impacts of the prevailing environmental discourse on environmental and ecological topics in the development of art. It shows how the popularization of environmental discourse and environmental themes encouraged the growth of art that is entirely focused on its ecological and environmental contexts. In the context of researching art in terms of promoting deep and positive changes in the appreciation of the environment and nature, this research also stresses the importance of the aesthetic experience of the environment in artistic creation. Exploring this approach reveals key differences between artists who focus on solving ecological problems and aesthetically engaged artists who adopt a deep and inclusive focus on the environment itself.

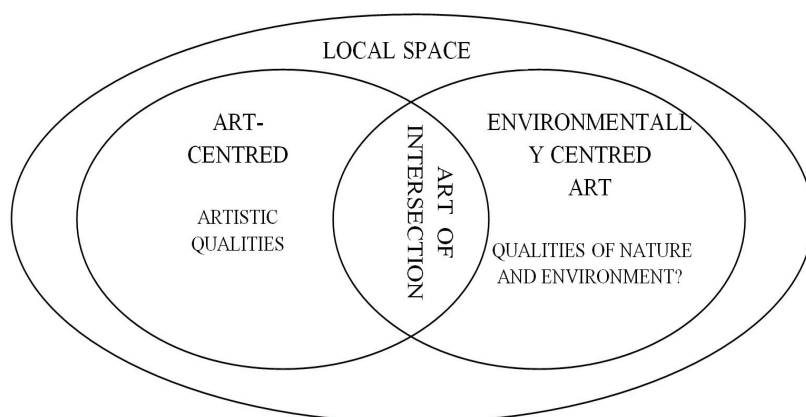
Keywords: environmental art, aesthetics, environmental discourse, ethics, environment, nature

Environmental art is a growing field of art that traces its origins back to the second half of the 20th century, when many artists began creating their works outside of galleries, in the open space of urban, rural, uninhabited areas, the North Pole, the sea, air, etc. In its broadest sense, environmental art can be understood as art that occurs in interaction with the environment and natural elements. It engages a wide field of different practices that take place in open spaces, becoming land art, earth art, ecoventions, eco-art, etc., but also includes works in galleries, namely those that introduce environmental issues and natural elements in gallery space. Regardless of the type of work, environmental works rarely constitute monuments or memorials in the traditional view; rather, they are dedicated to researching environmental topics, the relationships between humans and nature and culture and nature, ties between art, science, and nature, etc. The sphere of environmental art is therefore often intertwined with the natural and social sciences, urban planning, architecture, and especially with ecology. In certain artworks,

their environmental and ecological context dominates to such an extent that they are more easily characterized as environmental or ecological works, rather than art. On the other hand, some environmental works of art are not concerned with environmental issues, qualities, or the environment in general and take place in a certain environment only in order to express and obtain the artist's desired effect.

The following diagram may serve as a way of categorizing environmental art in the context of research.¹ The model rests on two central foci of appreciation in environmental art: the appreciation of an object of art on the one hand and the appreciation of the environment and nature on the other. When artists seek to pay respect to the qualities of the environment and nature, they try not to disturb it or otherwise make a negative impact on it. That means they might have to move from an “art-centred” (centred on artistic qualities) to an “environment-centred” position (centred on the qualities of the environment and nature).

Diagram: Main foci of appreciation in environmental art²



One should note that in order to promote a respectful attitude to the environment, works of environmental art should rest on a deep and inclusive focus on the environment and nature, which may primarily derive from an aesthetic appreciation of, and engagement with, the environment. Critically, this must not be limited to the abstract environmental topics spread by environmentalist discourse and dominant anthropocentric views of nature.

¹ My analytical focus here is on three-dimensional works of art and projects that are displayed in open spaces, in direct contact with the environment and nature.

² Tanja Plešivčnik, “Environmental Art and Appreciation of the Environment”, in: Jale Erzen and Rafaele Milani (eds.), *Nature and the City. Beauty is Taking on New Form*, Sassari, Edizione Edes, 2013, 313.

The Spread of Environmental Topics and Their Impacts on the Development of Art

Although global environmental discourse began as early as the 19th century,³ which coincided with the emergence of influential environmental issues in literature (e.g. Aldo Leopold, 1949), there was a general lack of widespread interest in environmental topics until the 1970s, when the earliest mass environmental movements emerged in Western countries and the first scientific studies of global warming came out. The proliferation of stories in the media triggered a rapid growth of interest in environmental topics, which was initially limited to local and regional topics. With the increasing reach of science and technology, the awareness of environmental topics and their impacts was globalized. The main topics of environmentalist discourse, environmental protection (the protection and preservation of the environment) and ecology (the relationship of humans to the environment) were thus extended to all areas of human activity: environmental management, science, art, etc.⁴

Initially, environmental art, land art, and earth art were generally dedicated to being art and were hardly concerned with environmental or ecological topics; therefore, in the diagram above, they might be placed in the art-centred area. Irrespective of their own immediate environment, all attention is focused on the artwork itself; the environment and natural elements act only as the medium of transmitting the art. This kind of work can have devastating effects on local environment and animate and inanimate nature alike, so today it is rare and often critically accepted only by those segments of the public whose environmental awareness is not particularly high. Michael Heizer offers some prime examples of such art. He used technology and heavy machinery to create his works that might have been made with natural materials onsite (*Double Negative*, 1969–1970) or by combining various natural and industrial materials (*City*, 1972–present; *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, 1969). Alternatively, some artists choose not to create their works by transforming the natural properties of the site; instead, they incorporate materials brought from elsewhere, e.g. Nancy Holt (*Sun Tunnels* 1973–1976: four 22-tonne concrete pipes with holes in the walls and placed in the desert) and Walter de Maria (*Lightning Field*, 1977: 400 vertical stainless-steel rods placed in a remote desert). Others choose to adopt more ephemeral gestures, like Christo and Jean Claude (*Wrapped Coast*, 1968–1969; *Surrounded Islands*, 1980–1983, *Wrapped Trees*, 1997–1998).

With the popularization of environmentalist discourse and spreading of urgent environmental topics, new directions developed in environmental art. Environmental problem solving, addressing issues such as pollution (water, soil, air), the reduction of biodiversity, deforestation, desertification, the reduction of energy sources, wastewater treatment, waste management, greening cities, etc. became the dominant source of inspiration for many environmental artists. In the diagram above, these artworks belong in the environmentally centred category. This field of art has expanded greatly in the last few decades and comprises numerous different practices, having little in common with traditional artistic practices. Defining these works as art is often possible only by knowing the identity of the artist. These artists are often researchers, ecologists, agents, initiators, and the like, and collaborate with scientists, such as botanists, zoologists, and ecologists, engineers, architects, designers, local communities,

³ In the 19th century, Alexander von Humboldt devised a new philosophical and ecological concept of the relationship between humans and the natural world and presented the idea of the interconnectedness of humanity with other forces in the universe.

⁴ Lisa M. Benton and John Rennie Short, *Environmental Discourse and Practice*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1999.

etc. in their projects (e.g. projects by Newton and Helen Harrison, Brandon Ballangee, Agnes Denes, etc.). Often they take place in urban, developed environments as well as devastated areas. In her book *Ecovention*, Sue Spaid offers insight into many of these practices.⁵

Although the primary focus of artists in the environmentally centred category is to promote environmental and ecological measures, it might be dubious to single out environmentally centred art as the only form appropriate for developing such sensitivity in the public and for expressing a deep appreciation of nature and the environment. There are artists who are in direct contact with nature and the environment and are often eco-conscious, but deeper insight reveals that many of them are not necessarily deeply engaged with the environment or nature. Their focus on ecological problems and environment protection may limit or distract them from fully committing their senses to the environment and nature and from developing intimate ties with them. Furthermore, contemporary environmentalist discourse and its effects have been increasingly criticized for overlooking more profound positive changes in our attitude to the environment. Although environmentalist discourse is not exclusively to blame for this and there are several culprits, recently we have been able to witness a predominance of a singular or hegemonic discourse, dominated by political ecology, with its own agenda. The environmentalist movement, which once cultivated the public's sensitivity to environmental problems, no longer dominates environmental discourse, even being pushed into a marginal sphere and labelled as a "cultural pressure group". Their once hegemonic position has been replaced with a number of competitors that produce, market, and communicate a "green image". The environmental concerns of the environmentalists and deep ecologists who are concerned with deeper cultural change has transformed into an everyday element of environmental discourse and thus they lost their visibility and power. Ecology has become a catchword (general content), attributable to any element in the public discourse on the environment: ethical issues in scientific theories and literary expressions on the relationship of humans and nature.⁶ Reformist political ecology has much influence in shaping public opinion, but at the same time, it is recognized as a pragmatic and insufficient actor for adopting comprehensive action to prevent ecological crises and producing more positive attitudes toward the environment.

Therefore, one can only search for deeper foundations and justifications of our care for nature and the environment in philosophical works, environmental ethics, and environmental aesthetics that underline the need for a deep change in our appreciation of the environment and nature. Deep ecology, conceptualized by Arne Naess, requires that one perceive the environment not through personal interests but on the basis of recognizing the intrinsic value of nature and the environment. In this way, the value of the environment could exist independently from any utility assigned to the non-human world for human purposes.⁷ Furthermore, Aldo Leopold believed that we could be moral only toward something we could see, feel, understand, and love;⁸ therefore, our concern for the environment should not focus only on gaining ecological knowledge, but also on expanding our direct contact with nature and from

⁵ Sue Spaid, *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*, <http://greenmuseum.org/c/ecovention/>, acc. March 15, 2012.

⁶ Klaus Eder, "The Institutionalisation of Environmentalism: Ecological Discourse and the Second Transformation of the Public Sphere", in: Scott M Lash, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Brian Wynne (eds.), *Risk, Environment and Modernity: Towards a New Ecology*, London, Sage Publication, 1996, 203–224.

⁷ Arne Naess, "Globoka ekologija in okoljsko sebstvo", *FNM: filozofska revija za učitelje filozofije, dijake in študente*, 2011, Vol. III, Issue 4, No. 18.

⁸ Aldo Leopold, "Deželska etika", *FNM: filozofska revija za učitelje filozofije, dijake in študente*, 2010, Vol. III, Issue 4, No. 17.

within, adopting a certain attitude that will enable us to focus deeply on the environment and nature, beyond our own interests. Both Leopold and Naess emphasize that care and respect for the environment should be based on a comprehension of nature and the environment, its components and processes, as an integrated whole, such that each part or any component has its value on the basis of its close relationship, reciprocity, and interdependence in the entire system. Further below, I will present how an aesthetic experience of environment plays an important role in that kind of awareness, mental image, or comprehension of the world. Therefore, it is important for environmental artists to extend and deepen their aesthetic appreciation, in order to create works that will promote deep care for nature and the environment.

Environmental Art through Aesthetic Appreciation of the Environment

An aesthetic engagement with the environment, one's complete immersion in the environment can, according to Berleant, lead one to perceive and understand the world, nature, people, and the environment as an integrated whole. When we aesthetically judge or appreciate the environment, we do not leave our perceptual sphere but become involved in it in ways that strengthen our awareness. The central element of aesthetic judgement is a focus on perceptual qualities, which in the appreciation of the environment means a focus on a direct contact with the environment and environmental phenomena. A full involvement in the environment that engages all types of senses and perception means enhancing our experience, the world, and life, building a holistic awareness – reaching a deep perspective of unity, where everything is a recognizable aspect of the natural sphere, including cultural and artistic creations. There is no complete separation; rather, nature is an all-encompassing, integrated, and continuous process, as stated by Spinoza. Nature is not only an honourable concept, but extends over everything: the vulgar and the sublime, the harsh and the kind, etc. As everything affects everything else, people in their surroundings are part of one and the same sphere. With such awareness, one could overcome palliative measures, such as improving degraded areas and dumps, toward a more serious concern for the environment, which would be articulate and could develop judgements and values from within.⁹ Therefore, recognizing the role of aesthetics in the environment not only affects our understanding of aesthetics, but also opens our senses to nature and the environment. The aesthetic qualities of the environment are not always pleasing or positive, but according to Berleant, for a fully engaged participant, the aesthetic factor is omnipresent. Aesthetics is a universal category and a pervasive concept of extended experience.¹⁰

Direct contact with nature and aesthetic engagement promote a multi-sensory perception of the environment, imagination, emotions, and thoughts that can lead to the establishment of intimate bonds with the environment and nature. Brady emphasizes the importance of the subject's direct contact and multi-sensory engagement, but in contrast with Berleant,¹¹ she does not reject the traditional aspects of aesthetic theory and draws attention to the concept of how disinterestedness plays a central role in aesthetic appreciation of nature and the environment and how it enables the subject to move away from the anthropocentric point of view

⁹ Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992, 2–39.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Berleant argues that it is necessary to replace the concept of disinterestedness and contemplative attitude of the observer with the active role of the participant, who is never separate from the environment. *Ibid*, 160–175.

in perceiving nature. Brady wants to establish a new understanding of the concept of disinterestedness, as opposed to dismissiveness, that would abandon its negative connotations and reveal how the concept supports active engagement and sympathetic attention. She argues that disinterestedness, which is an aspect of aesthetic experience, enables free play of the imagination and opens the possibility of a more intimate integration in an environment where we deepen and expand our appreciation, but maintain a type of distance that will keep us from approaching it for our own interests.¹² In this light, aesthetic experience may provide us with a way of focusing away from our own interests and instead on qualities of the environment for their own sake.

Environmental artists have generally entered into direct contact with the environment and nature with what drives the activities of perception, imagination, emotions, and thought so they could build intimate ties with the environment. Direct contact with the environment and nature can secure the establishment of a deep appreciation of the environment and nature. However, one could argue that many environmental artists abandon their focus on the perceptual qualities, on the environment and nature in themselves, before they become actively involved or fully engaged in order to focus on their own purposes, such as creating a work of art (in art-focused art) or creating ecological, environmental works (in environmentally focused art). Consequently, establishing and developing their comprehensive, deep aesthetic appreciation is limited, and they fail fully and respectfully to connect with an integrated environment, as proposed through holistic experience.

We can argue that the attitude of an artistically as well as environmentally focused artist is not disinterested, as their appreciation is based on *a priori* notions about certain objects or the environment, and moreover, that their focus is on their own objectives, creating environmental or “good” works. However, the complication of currently solving ecological issues and a myriad of related actions or “ecological works” is that the underlying perceptions all follow dominantly anthropocentric views of the environment and nature: they address the environment on a selective and superficial level. The creators of such works overlook the opportunity to establish an intimate connection and deep engagement with the environment, which is necessary for a more comprehensive and deeper appreciation.

Furthermore, Saito warns that conventional ecological awareness is not enough to stimulate social change in attitudes and appreciation of the environment, yet aesthetic experience does play a significant role. She is concerned with searching for ways of using the power of aesthetics for developing a kind of aesthetic appreciation that would not have negative consequences for the environment, i.e. a “green aesthetics”. As the basis for establishing a green aesthetics, she points to a spread of correct environmentally aware propaganda with an appealing aesthetic appearance. Therefore, she emphasizes the necessity of creating aesthetically appealing artefacts that are environmentally harmless.¹³ Similarly, Marcia Eaton supports the possibility of promoting a green agenda through aesthetic engineering: “creating sustainable environments necessitates asking not just what people do find beautiful but what they should find beautiful”.¹⁴ The intersection category¹⁵ comprises works of art that are eco-committed,

¹² Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

¹³ Green aesthetics, a term coined by Saito, means aesthetic appreciation based on a deep and inclusive respect for environmental values and is not limited to nature and the environment, but also includes artefacts. See: Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, New York, Oxford University Press Inc., 2007, 69–83.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 77.

¹⁵ See the diagram above.

aesthetically appealing, or contain a recognizable artistic touch; for example, wind turbines promote the use of wind energy and inspire unique artistic products, eco-art designs, etc. While environmentally centred artists frequently acquire scientific and ecological knowledge and seek to contribute to the promotion of good practices through their actions, they often neglect paying respect to the deeper aesthetic qualities of their works. Their works may have similarly positive elements to those of other environmentalists' works, yet they fail to promote a green aesthetics.

Of course, we cannot criticize all environmentally centred work for lacking proper aesthetic appreciation. Some environmental activism may arise from a deep and comprehensive perceiving of the environment. We cannot assert that environmentally focused artists are incapable of promoting aesthetic appreciation of the environment and nature. Art projects such as the greening of urban areas (projects of Alan Sonfist, Joseph Beuys, etc.) give urban populations the opportunity of direct contact with natural elements and intimate contact with nature, respectively; in her participatory projects (*Tree Mountain, A Living Time Capsule*), Agnes Denes gave the participants an opportunity to plant trees. These aspects of aesthetic appreciation only reassert that our concern for the environment must not only focus on environmental topics, but also expand our direct contact with nature and the environment, to develop a correct attitude and enable us to have a more comprehensive and deeper appreciation of nature and the environment, which should lead us to respect them in their own right.

Finally, we may argue that works by environmental artists that are deeply aesthetically engaged with the environment should be based on a respectful behaviour toward those objects as well as their links with the environment. The character of each object or material needs to be respected as well as the aesthetic of ambience, the multisensory experience of the whole complex: "...sound, physical environment, time of day and season...., give rise to a unified expression",¹⁶ and its contextual appropriateness or inappropriateness.¹⁷ We appreciate the way in which various elements come together to give expression to a unified quality, atmosphere, or ambience. As Aldo Leopold stated in his premise of environmental ethics: "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".¹⁸ We can suggest that the category of intersection,¹⁹ comprising works of environmental art that have a distinctive artistic character and at the same time respect the qualities of environment includes artists who have established intimate relationships with the environment, are deeply engaged with it, and show respect to the content, materials, ambience – the environment in general. Their inspiration derives from a deep aesthetic appreciation of the environment and can promote the formation of a deeper, more comprehensive and inclusive care for the environment in general.

Here, I might point out works by Andy Goldsworthy, as perhaps the best-known representative of such practices. In general, these practices are presented through everyday life: from childhood games of assembling natural elements, branches, leaves, straw, making snowmen and igloos, etc. to common, worldwide practices of building dry stonewalls and sustainable

¹⁶ Ibid, 122.

¹⁷ Marcia Eaton gives the example of a log cabin or abandoned shack as being generally valued as aesthetically positive in a pristine natural environment but not in an urban environment. An opposite example could be a fast-food restaurant. Ibid, 122.

¹⁸ Aldo Leopold, op. cit. 189.

¹⁹ A number of works by Andy Goldsworthy; Richard Long, *Line in Himalayas*, 1975; Alfio Bonanno, *Giant Nest and Insect Forest*, 2004, etc.

buildings from local materials, and much more. Through these activities we are not only in direct contact with the environment, but are also actively engaged with it, through the activities of our perception, imagination, emotions, and thought. Our level of engagement depends on how long we spend in direct contact and on our approach to the environment. Can we be active creators and simultaneously approach the environment without interest? Brady argues that disinterestedness is not necessarily connected to passivity and distance and that it only means setting aside our interests and freeing ourselves for imaginative activities.²⁰ Therefore, disinterestedness does not preclude creation, but rather allows us in our creating process to distance ourselves from any unconditional control of nature and the environment under the guidance of our intentions to develop obedience and sensitivity toward the environment.

Conclusion

Ecology and ecological awareness can valuably complement our appreciation of the environment and enhance our concern for the environment and nature. However, we experience the environment around us through perception; therefore, aesthetic experience is always present in the environment. Direct contact with nature and the environment, where we can distance our own interests from our engagement in order to relax and pursue free imaginative activities enables us to connect to the environment in an intimate way, which promotes a respectful attitude toward it. Thereby, our concern for the environment deepens and becomes more comprehensive. Throughout this paper, I sought to promote the idea that in order to express and promote deep care for the environment, artists must develop an intimate engagement with the environment and nature, with their perceptual qualities, to arrive at a more comprehensive appreciation of nature and the environment; therefore, the perceptual qualities of the environment should not be neglected or simply replaced with dissemination and adoption of ecological information and action. As Berleant says: "Aesthetics [...] is no illusory escape from the moral realm but ultimately becomes both its guide and its fulfillment."²¹

²⁰ Emily Brady, *op. cit.*

²¹ Arnold Berleant, *op. cit.* 13.