

# Contemporary Art and Environmental Aesthetics

SAMANTHA CLARK

*School of Creative and Cultural Industries  
University of the West of Scotland  
Ayr Campus  
Beech Grove, Ayr, KA8 0SR, UK  
Samantha.Clark@uws.ac.uk*

## ABSTRACT

Aesthetic debates within contemporary art have been tangential to the debates in environmental aesthetics since the 1960s. I argue that these disciplines, having evolved separately in response to the limitations of traditional aesthetics, may now usefully inform each other. Firstly, the dematerialisation of art as the focus of aesthetic experience may have environmentally useful consequences. Secondly, Gablik's 'connective aesthetics', like Berleant's 'aesthetics of engagement', folds aesthetic experience into the social as a kind of environmental aesthetics. Thirdly, contemporary art's flexible readings of 'framing' can respond to 'frameless' natural environments, and finally, Kester's 'dialogical aesthetics' may be enriched by Berleant's systematic account of 'contextual aesthetics'.

## KEYWORDS

Dialogical aesthetics, connective aesthetics, participatory, environmental art

## INTRODUCTION

Ronald Hepburn's 1966 essay 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' is generally credited with re-invigorating the debate around the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments which had lain dormant since the nineteenth century. He notes that while eighteenth-century discussions of aesthetics explored ideas of the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque in nature, thereafter the focus shifted rapidly towards art. Hepburn suggests that aesthetics had become understood as a 'philosophy of art', and had avoided natural environments because there are particular features of aesthetic experience as understood within art which are not present in nature: namely the artist's intention, and the 'frame'. Therefore, in the field of traditional aesthetic theory the object or artefact is the appropriate focus of aesthetic appreciation. Natural beauty, by not providing us with neatly framed objects or artistic expressions, thus slipped out of the debate.

Hepburn saw this as a problem in urgent need of attention, as, by ignoring a whole set of human experiences of natural environments, aesthetic theory was leaving them 'off the map', and therefore less likely to be explored, shared, discussed and understood. A vital area of human experience was, through the lack of a detailed and systematic account of our aesthetic enjoyment of nature, in danger of being left underdeveloped (Hepburn, 2004: 44).

Since then, a great deal of work has been done to address this, and indeed within philosophical aesthetics an entire sub-discipline of environmental aesthetics has emerged. My aim here is to consider the possibility that, forty years since the first publication of Hepburn's paper, we may have reached a point at which the two divergent lines of debate he outlines, the aesthetics of art and the aesthetics of natural environments, may be once again converging. I will do this by introducing and exploring some of the aesthetic frameworks being developed around practices within contemporary art known variously as 'participatory', 'dialogical' or 'socially engaged', giving some examples of art practice relevant to the discussion here and which address the wider environmental debate. My intention is not to analyse these art works in depth, rather to anchor the abstract theoretical discussion in some concrete examples. I will argue that while the discourse within art criticism and the unfolding debates within philosophical environmental aesthetics may seem tangential, there are parallels in these debates, and the two disciplines might usefully inform each other. To draw out these parallels we must first, however, detail the nature of the problem Hepburn identified, and then characterise the aesthetic frameworks for the appreciation of natural environments which have since been developed in response. I will then go on to outline some of

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the critiques of traditional aesthetics within art discourse, and point out areas of mutual interest where the two disciplines overlap and inform each other.

### HEPBURN'S CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL AESTHETICS

Hepburn's premise is that, while our experience of nature may be shaped by our experience of art, to impose an aesthetics of art on the natural environment ignores essential differences. Kant's analysis identifies the distinguishing features of aesthetic judgement as a consequence of an attunement between the perceptual qualities of the object as it meets our senses and the 'free play of imagination' and understanding within the subject (Kant, 1984). In this, our awareness of the origin of the object and the context of our experience have roles to play. When we consider an artwork, we know that this object has been intentionally brought into being by an artist, and we can understand our aesthetic experience as being directed by deliberate cues.

This 'expression theory' of art sees aesthetic experience as a communication from the author, while variations of this view emphasise the object itself as a link, a parcel of meaning passed from artist to viewer (Hepburn, 2004: 44). Hepburn noted that to place exclusive focus on the object itself ignores the many contextual factors that enter into aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, naturally occurring forms are not generally viewed, in modern secular society at least, as being deliberately imbued with meanings in this way. This lack of intended meaning has both negative and positive implications. While it tends to emphasise subjective and personal interpretations which may or may not be shared with others, it leaves scope for various meanings to be brought to our encounters with natural objects, richly informed by what we each sense, feel, think and know.

A further difference between the aesthetic appreciation of art and of nature that Hepburn notes is the absence of 'framing' in nature (2004: 46). The ontology of art objects places a boundary around the object of our aesthetic contemplation by means of various conventions; physical boundaries such as the picture frame, the pedestal, the plinth, or proscenium arch, and contextual and conventional framings which place the object within an art gallery and art discourse, a theatre, even the typographical layout of a page of poems. These framing devices demurely set the art object apart from the background hurly burly of daily existence in a distinctive way, allowing us to focus on aesthetic characteristics as determined by the object's internal structure. The limitations of this view are obvious enough as soon as we contemplate our response to natural environments, where nature does not provide us with such

convenient framing devices. Hepburn, however, celebrates this framelessness, as we are challenged to create our own contingent and responsive framing. For example when we contemplate a fine hilltop prospect, we can choose either to include or exclude the sense of our body's response to the steep climb, the distant sounds of road traffic, or of nearby birdsong. According to Hepburn 'this provisional and elusive character of aesthetic qualities in nature creates a restlessness, an alertness, a search for ever new standpoints and more comprehensive gestalts' (2004: 49) and identifies the qualities of immersion and movement as we experience landscapes.

There is a reflexive quality to this for we also experience *ourselves* more vividly, as we are bodily immersed 'in' the aesthetic experience, not looking 'at' it from beyond the frame. Natural objects are subject to constant change, and we ourselves move through an environment, dynamically engaging all our bodily senses as we walk, swim, climb, sniff, chew a sweet blade of grass or just stop and stare. But according to Hepburn, we will not fully appreciate nature unless we take up these aesthetic challenges by actively refusing to 'heed only those features of a natural object which most readily come together in a familiar pattern or which yield a comfortingly generalized emotional quality' (2004: 49). Problematising a lazy aesthetic appreciation of nature characterised by the passive visual enjoyment of 'scenery' sliding past the car windscreen has environmental implications, suggesting that a deeper, more fully engaged, and more active aesthetic appreciation of nature can deepen our attachment to nature and foster a more respectful, less instrumental, or at least less thoughtlessly destructive relationship with the natural environment.

As Hepburn points out, the indeterminacy of the aesthetic response to nature poses challenges to aestheticians in that it does not follow the guidelines set out within traditional aesthetics and therefore requires a different framework. When we consider an art object we bring with us our knowledge about art to enrich the experience and guide our visual and imaginative response, but this is not adequate when we move out into the landscape. Certainly, some natural objects may delight us by their resemblance to artefacts, such as a sea worn flint's chance resemblance to a Henry Moore sculpture, but this alone is not sufficient, as it privileges art over nature and reduces nature to cultural construct. While some may indeed take this view, I would like here to explore positions that allow for some sense of a nature that is worthy of aesthetic appreciation in its own right.

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DEBATES WITHIN ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS –  
CARLSON'S 'ORDER APPRECIATION'

Since Hepburn nailed his colours to the mast, a range of theories have been offered that aim to provide more appropriate ways of understanding the aesthetic response to nature. These are often characterised as taking either a 'cognitive' or a 'non-cognitive' approach, and parallel the debates about the role of knowledge in our interpretation of art. Cognitive approaches suggest that other contextual knowledge such as ecology, geology or meteorology can replace the knowledge of art to guide and enrich our aesthetic response to nature. Non-cognitive approaches emphasise the role that immediate perceptual experience plays, along with imagination and other non-scientific narrative contexts such as a myth or memory. For the purposes of this essay this characterisation is necessarily a brief sketch, focusing on two major contributors who represent the two approaches, Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant. It is important to note that to view the debate in terms of a strict dualism between objectivity and subjectivity, between thinking and feeling, would be to oversimplify the various positions, as knowledge of some kind features in both approaches. However, each approach presents different emphases on the role and necessity of *scientific* knowledge in aesthetic experiences.

Of the 'cognitive' approaches Allen Carlson's 'natural environmental model' is the most established and most strongly scientific, outlining a set of criteria specific to natural environments that can replace the traditional art-history based model with one based on natural history (Carlson, 1995: 199–227). Carlson's aim is to establish a means by which we can demonstrate that aesthetic judgements of nature are not purely subjective and relative, but have reference to a shared knowledge base and can therefore be objectively 'true', shared, defensible and therefore useful in environmental deliberation and decision making. Picking up on critiques of formalism in art which insist that contextual knowledge is not only desirable but *necessary* for the correct aesthetic appreciation of art, Carlson extends this by contending that analogous contexts for nature can be found in the natural sciences. In so doing, he seeks to establish a set of general criteria for the aesthetic evaluation of nature. Carlson deals with the problem of the lack of a creator's or artist's *intention* in the natural objects we find through his notion of 'order appreciation' (1995: 217). Here, the appreciator selects and focuses on certain elements, using knowledge of the natural forces that shaped the object, 'the order of nature', in much the same way as we might use our knowledge of art to enrich our aesthetic experience of a painting. Carlson's model is most clearly applicable in environments where human

influences are minimal, and it is hard to see how cultural and personal factors can be considered incidental to aesthetic engagement with highly cultivated landscapes shaped by centuries of human intervention. However, as he points out in his paper in this issue, we do not need to choose between cognitive and non-cognitive approaches, as feeling and knowing are not mutually exclusive, and indeed it is the play between these that lies at the heart of aesthetic experience (Carlson, 2010: 306). Nevertheless, offering different frameworks for the aesthetic experience of art and of nature does tend to reinforce a separation between the human and the natural. The difference between an artefact and a natural object such as a woodland may not be clearly distinct in the cultivated landscapes that many of us experience most regularly. Carlson's highly objective, scientific environmental aesthetic would tend to exclude not only art but the built environment, the managed 'semi-natural' environment, and the social environment, which in reality are the environments most of us encounter on a daily basis. It would seem therefore that one set of limitations has been replaced with another.

#### BERLEANT'S 'AESTHETICS OF ENGAGEMENT' AND 'CONTEXTUAL AESTHETICS'

'Non-cognitive' approaches to the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments tend to emphasise the immediacy of perception in aesthetic responses, and the fullness of our participation in the experience. For example, Arnold Berleant's 'aesthetics of engagement' is characterised by an embodied, phenomenological approach to experience (Berleant, 1995: 228–243). Implicit in this is a critique of the dualist reading of subject/object ontology which assumes that we undergo an aesthetic experience as a disembodied contemplative appreciator. In Berleant's aesthetics of engagement the appreciator is actively involved in generating the aesthetic experience, bringing as much to the party as the environment or art object being experienced (1995: 238). His framework does not make a special case for nature, but rather opens up aesthetic experience into something flexible and inclusive enough to avoid the limitations of traditional aesthetics, and to accommodate the full range of human experience. Furthermore, Berleant does not see humans (and thus culture) as separate from environment and makes a case for a 'general' theory of aesthetics which begins with the natural environment, and can also accommodate cultural artefacts. This would seem to be a sensible approach, for surely our distant ancestors were inspired first by their environment to make and enjoy art, not the reverse.

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Berleant takes issue with the notion of 'disinterestedness', which Kant considered a prerequisite for receiving aesthetic experience, here understood as the setting aside of personal or practical interests in the object of contemplation (Berleant, 1995: 229). The various framing devices which circumscribe art objects are cues and aids to achieving the corresponding aesthetic 'frame of mind', and also sever the aesthetic object's links with utility, for in the traditional view the lofty aesthetic experience should not be sullied by considerations of the object's function. Berleant points out that this is a model based on the static, visual arts which is already inadequate in the context of dance, performance, music or literature, and of progressively less use as we move through architectural spaces, gardens, into fields and further into uncultivated landscapes (1995: 231).

While Carlson deals with the problem of the lack of a creator's intention in nature by developing a separate, parallel aesthetic theory for natural environments, Berleant questions the emphasis on the *object* which underlies both models. 'A world of objects is easier to circumscribe and control' (1995: 232) but this is not the world we experience phenomenologically, he argues, and conventional aesthetics thus impedes our encounters both with the arts and with natural environments. Berleant thinks the key might lie within traditional aesthetic notions of 'the sublime', with its sense of the magnitude and power of nature. The terror of the sublime experience is not in the plunging gorge or raging torrent, but in the mind of the perceiver, viewing from a safe distance; the fear in the sublime is not real threat to life. However, nature is unruly and in the face of global climate shifts and ecological 'tipping-points' we now know there is no safe distance from which to view nature while enjoying a delicious *frisson* of horror. Berleant suggests that we embrace this connectedness. Within the sublime is an awe and humility which he sees as an appropriate basis for an aesthetics of nature which 'exceeds the human mind' (1995: 236). This is going to be an uncomfortable experience unless we relinquish our need to objectify and control, and enter as participants rather than observers.

Although the Kantian sublime focuses on powerful experiences, Berleant suggests we carry this through to include more gentle, everyday situations. Even a walk in the local park can become an occasion for full sensory immersion, waking us from the sedative of ordinariness that so often dulls our senses. Based on the sublime as immersive experience, Berleant frames an aesthetic theory of nature and of art; a participatory, inclusive and flexible theory of aesthetic experience where site and perceiver combine to form the experience, in a phenomenological reading of perception as a reciprocal relationship between observer and observed. He suggests we bring this to

our aesthetic appreciation of art, claiming that ‘a single aesthetics applies to nature and art, because, in the final analysis they are both cultural constructs and so we are not talking about two things but one’ (1995: 241). This sense of merger between the human and the natural may be read as implying that nature, in the sense of an entity apart from human intervention, has ceased to exist. As ecofeminists such as Val Plumwood have pointed out, this lack of distinction between self and other, human and nature, obliterates difference and can result in a failure to distinguish between the interests of the self/human and the interests of the other/nature (Plumwood, 1991). I would suggest that this is mitigated by Berleant’s emphasis elsewhere on awareness of a nature that ‘exceeds the human mind’, (1995: 236) and thus puts us in a position of wonder, humility, reciprocity and vulnerability. The notion of reciprocity is further developed in Berleant’s more recent work which begins to bring environmental aesthetics to bear on the social, cultural and built environments most of us actually inhabit.

In his essay ‘Ideas for a Social Aesthetic’ (2005: 23–38) Berleant argues that even traditional aesthetics can lead us, via a consideration of sculptural form, installation art and architectural space, where dimensions of time and participation through movement begin to figure, into the social environment – the human activities and interaction which take place in these spaces. He outlines a ‘contextual aesthetics’ with specific features: ‘acceptance’ as an open and non-judgemental quality of attention, ‘perception’ as sensory experience inclusive of memory, imagination and thought, a ‘sensuousness’ inclusive of all the senses, not just the distance receptors of sight and hearing emphasised in traditional aesthetics, ‘discovery’ as a freshness and sense of new possibilities, ‘uniqueness’ in the unrepeatability of each aesthetic experience, ‘reciprocity’ as a dynamic exchange, ‘continuity’ of all these factors, ‘engagement’ where boundaries fade away and we become vulnerable, and a ‘multiplicity’ of sites for aesthetic involvement, limited only by our willingness to participate and our perceptual sensitivity (2005: 26–29). While he acknowledges that in many situations the aesthetic is not dominant, he does suggest it is potentially present in a multitude of everyday contexts. This contextual aesthetics, he suggests ‘could be construed as resembling human relations’, and form the basis of a social aesthetics which may be a *kind* of environmental aesthetics, for in both many factors combine to shape the aesthetic experience, including participants, site and cultural context.

While there is no artist, as such, creative processes are at work in the participants, who emphasize and shape the perceptual features, and supply meaning and interpretation. There is certainly no art object here, but the situation itself

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becomes the focus of perceptual attention, as it does in conceptual sculpture and environments. (2005: 31).

The specific examples Berleant gives include etiquette, ritual, and human relationships of sexual love and parental care, but the situated, contextual and contingent aesthetics he describes could equally be applied, as he begins to suggest, to contemporary art practices. I will now outline how the debates around the limitations of traditional aesthetics have been unfolding within art over the same time period since Hepburn's essay opened up the debate, giving particular consideration to how Berleant's ideas can be seen to parallel, and in some aspects usefully inform the debate around aesthetic appreciation of participatory art practices.

### AESTHETICS AND THE DEMATERIALISATION OF ART

In her well-known outline of *The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* art critic Lucy Lippard has argued that the rise of conceptualism and durational performance art from the 1960s onwards has challenged the traditional assumption that art can be defined primarily as visual (Lippard, 1997). As Berleant also notes, the history of art may not be a history of objects after all, but a history of attitudes to perception, and that this perception is not purely visual, rather an aesthetic experience which engages all of the senses (Berleant, 1995: 232). Small wonder then, that we encounter problems when it comes to applying traditional aesthetics to the aesthetic appreciation of nature, as its limitations mean it does not help us to understand much contemporary art practice either.

The static model of the aesthetic appreciation of art that Hepburn describes as pertaining exclusively to art is overturned in the artist Victor Burgin's almost contemporary essay, 'Situational Aesthetics', first published in 1969. Here Burgin proposes that concepts of artistic form should be redefined, not as manufactured 'things' but as 'experiences'. Burgin describes a situation where aesthetic *systems* are designed, which in turn are capable of generating objects (2002: 894–897). Here the designing intellect renounces a degree of the 'minute control over our response' that Hepburn has defined as a crucial element of art (Hepburn, 2004: 44). We see in Burgin's ideas the notion of aesthetic experience of art as an open-ended conversation. However, this retains something of the didactic quality of expression theory, where an author does the expressing and the viewer listens attentively. Furthermore, there is still an object generated by the process Burgin describes; some current art practice takes this renunciation of control still further and no longer

holds the object as the focus of artistic output and primary locus of aesthetic experience, in some cases dispensing with it altogether.

If we accept Hepburn's view that an aesthetic experience not fully theorised and understood is likely to be visited less fully, frequently and deeply, and that a more comprehensive and engaged environmental aesthetic may foster a more respectful relationship with the natural environment, it can be argued that this dematerialisation of the art object as focus of our aesthetic attention may have a side-effect potentially relevant to environmentalism. Let's return to Burgin's essay for a moment:

Each day we face the intractability of materials which have outstayed their welcome. Many recent attitudes to materials in art are based in an emerging awareness of the interdependence of all substances within the ecosystem of the earth. The artist is liable to see himself [*sic*] not as a creator of new material forms but rather as a co-ordinator of existing forms. (Burgin, 2002: 895)

In other words there is just so much damned stuff out there, where is the aesthetic value in creating more stuff? Burgin quotes John Cage's eloquent description of 'the mountains of aesthetic commodities and utilitarian objects which spill in unconceivable profusion from the cybernated cornucopias of industry' (2002: 895). No wonder then that we find the aesthetic experience recoiling from the aesthetic *object*, towards the weightlessness of the aesthetic *idea*.

What Burgin describes is an aesthetic of thinking, where the aesthetic experience of an artwork is as likely to be located in psychological space as in real space (2002: 894). We can understand aesthetic appreciation as a way of 'making sense' of our environment and the objects and situations within it. This view allows for aesthetic experience which is neither self-indulgent hedonistic sensuality, nor purely for the sake of knowledge, but a means by which we discover meanings and increase the value we find in the things, places, situations and relationships we encounter. Recognising and thus enhancing the aesthetic value we may find in working with what we have already, an aesthetics of 'less is more', where environmentally costly objects, within an art gallery, or indeed elsewhere in the designed and built environment, are seen as bloated and unnecessary, may thus have happy environmental consequences.

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## THE ART OF CONVERSATION

An early and often cited example of the kind of artistic practice which focuses on participation and social engagement rather than object-production is the work of New York-based artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Her project ‘Touch Sanitation’ (1979–80) took place over an eleven month period, during which time Ukeles personally met with every one of New York’s 8,500 sanitation workers, shaking hands and thanking each one for ‘Keeping New York alive’ (figure 1). The focus of this work was not on the images or objects generated, but the conversations and potential transformations that surrounded the work. Images, both still and moving, are certainly generated but serve as documentation of the process rather than as sole output. This work has been much discussed and written about extensively elsewhere (Lippard, 1997; Manacorda, 2009; Weintraub, 2007) so I will not enter into a lengthy analysis here, but I offer this and other examples to place the theoretical debate within the context of art practice.



FIGURE 1. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, ‘Touch Sanitation’ Performance, New York City Department of Sanitation (1979–80). Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

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In her 1991 book *The Reenchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik describes this way of making art happen collaboratively. She notes that an art that requires participation rather than observation will no longer be separate from its living context, nor from its audience. Meaning is no longer located either in the observer or in the observed but in the space between them.

Interaction is the key to move art beyond the aesthetic mode: letting the audience interact with and even form part of the process, recognizing that when observer and observed merge, the vision of static autonomy is undermined (1991: 151).

In her later discussion of ‘connective aesthetics’ (1996) Gablik links object-focused Modernism with the rise of scientific objectivity, but notes that the limitations of both views have become increasingly obvious. The sciences of ecology, quantum theory, cybernetics and systems theory now define the world in terms of interactions and relationships. Similarly, she argues that a reductive view of ‘art for art’s sake’ has removed art from its rightful place in the thick of life, by corralling it into academia and the gallery system. She suggests that an art practice arising from a ‘listening Self’ knits self with other in an experience of flow and empathy which naturally connects artist and audience with the wider social and environmental context (Gablik, 1996: 82–83). This seems to mirror Berleant’s position which also suggests the need to break down our sense of a separate ‘appreciator’ (Berleant, 1992: 11). He proposes that the ‘environment’ does not simply surround us, but rather that we are embedded within its processes, part of the endless flows of energy and matter. An aesthetics of objects, he points out, suggests the possibility of a detached observer. However, we cannot stand back from nature to get a better look (1992: 11–12). Gablik is suggesting that this ‘standing back’ from art is a legacy of our culture’s fixation with objectivity, and of the ideas of Modernism, so while it is certainly *possible* to stand back from art it is not desirable, for Gablik’s basic argument is that placing art on a pedestal like this in fact renders it useless. Like fine Victorian ladies busy with their lacework, Fine Art viewed in this way may look like it is *for* something, but really it isn’t. Berleant’s critique of ‘disinterestedness’ is that it is based on a static, visual model of art and therefore of limited usefulness. Gablik’s critique focuses on how this model of art removes it from its wider social and environmental context. I suggest that while approaching from different angles, both Gablik and Berleant offer frameworks for the opening up of aesthetic experience into something which is enfolded naturally into the world of social and environmental situations. As in Berleant’s ‘aesthetics of

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engagement', in Gablik's 'connective aesthetic' we find the situation as the focus, with the participants supplying meaning and interpretation.

Both Berleant and Gablik seem to be proposing an aesthetic where we engage in a conversational mode as an active participant. It is this active listening, and the stillness we are seldom allowed in urban life, that American artist Erica Fielder seeks to activate with projects such as 'Birdfeeder Hat: Seeding Watershed Awareness' (2003) (figure 2). Fielder invites members of the public to wear the Birdfeeder Hat, to sit still and quiet long enough for birds to come and feed, and then to tune into the movements of the tiny visitors who are obscured from direct view by the hat's wide brim. Fielder invites participants to open their full sensory awareness to the other species who inhabit our watershed (Fielder, 2003). Her project is an invitation to participate in a re-awakening of our senses, and our sense of kinship with other beings and is set within the context of environmental education. The object here is the catalyst, not the focus, of the aesthetic experience, with the artist in the role of facilitator.



FIGURE 2. Erica Fielder 'Bird Feeder Hat: Seeding Watershed Awareness' event at Mendocino Coast Botanical Garden, California (2003) photo: Connie Korbelt. Image courtesy the artist.

## CALL THAT 'ART'? FRAMING AS INVITATION

While Gablik and Berleant both take a critical view of notions of framing and disinterestedness in the sense of the separation implied, Lippard considers this can in fact be a useful creative strategy, allowing a space for reflection and a critical distance from daily concerns. She argues that in the context of contemporary art practice, *how the frame is used* has changed (2006). Throwing the frame of art around an activity not normally considered on these terms can be a fruitful exercise, and art has benefited from the hybrid vigour of these practices, such as the 1960's Fluxus movement and the 'social sculpture' of Joseph Beuys. The function of framing an activity as art is not so much to inform us that the object within it has been endowed with special qualities by the artist, but rather to create a space within which a certain quality of *attention* is invited. This reading of disinterestedness does not so much sever the links between the object of aesthetic experience and its function in the wider context as offer the possibility of seeing those links in a fresh light.

In 2008, Scottish artist Justin Carter was commissioned to make a site-specific artwork for Stavanger, Norway. Following a series of visits to the city the artist decided to install a lighting system beneath Bybrua (City Road Bridge) in order to illuminate a dark pedestrian underpass. The lights were powered by 12v batteries, which had to be recharged daily by three different pedal powered generators. For a period of ten days the artist toured these generators around various schools, streets, gymnasiums, parks, cafes, museums and cultural centres in order to gather and store human energy from those willing to gift it. One generator/bicycle named 'Bridgit' (figure 3) offered free transit across the bridge to pedestrians. At the end of each day the batteries were gathered and re-connected to the lighting system to power the lights during hours of darkness, harvesting the day's human energy. Carter says the intention was to encourage discussions around renewable energy and the city, with Norway's enormous oil wealth adding piquancy to the debate (Carter, 2008). Carter's project aimed to re-ignite a conviviality which is in counterpoint to public conflict and fear, and which manifests here as the illumination of a dark and uncongenial urban space by freely gifted human effort. The artist's role here is to throw the frame of 'art' around specific topics of discussion and maintain that focus and momentum for a specific period of time.

Lippard (2006) argues that art's ability to frame many different types of visual or social experience allows artists the flexibility to undermine confrontational stances and ask open-ended questions about our relationship

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FIGURE 3. Justin Carter (2008) 'Pedal Power for Bybrua', Stavanger. Image courtesy the artist.

to the world. She points out that dispensing with the frame altogether may be challenging but that 'it may be possible to change frames on the spot, offering a set of multiple views of the ways a space or place can be used, what its components are, how to read the land' (2006: 14).

This could be construed as resembling the contingent and responsive framing of aesthetic experience in natural environments which Hepburn identified. However, the balance of power within such participatory practices is not straightforward, for the selection of what is framed as art, and therefore as an aesthetic experience, is made by the artist. This contrasts with the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, where the selection is made by the appreciator, who chooses to include this or that feature. Ukeles' handshakes, Fielder's attentive birdfeeders, and Carter's conversations about renewable energy are art because they, as artists, have made this designation. Furthermore, if we have not participated directly in such dialogically-based art projects we are ultimately dependent on the artist's record of the process. The artists may not see themselves as sole authors, but in most cases they retain a strong degree of editorial control over the resulting documentation. These texts, images and artefacts return us once more to a familiar world of art objects, which bear no more resemblance to the original aesthetic experience than does a photograph of a forest to the experience of walking in it. As participants-after-the-fact our view of the context and process of the dialogue, the quality of the exchange, and of any transformative insights that may emerge from the process, is dependent on how they are presented to us by the artist. However art works such as those described above have no definitive final form and may be encountered through rumour, story, image, text, weblog, video, postcard, gallery show, book or magazine publication. All are equally valid ways of discovering the work. Once the artist places such projects in the public domain, the space between the 'actual' event and the multiple means by which we discover it later allows such art projects to remain open to new interpretations and multiple meanings. The locus of aesthetic experience of such art works is neither wholly located in the experience of direct participation, nor in the collections of objects and images generated, but remains elusive and resistant to fixed readings.

So while the process of such art is participatory, we see that it is still the artist who consciously locates the activity within a discourse of art, and who largely produces and selects the material which places it there. However within the process itself, not every participant will necessarily agree with the artist. The aesthetic experience is only present in such an encounter as an invitation, and each participant must actively choose to engage in this way, or not. As we have seen, Hepburn considered that we

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do not have a full aesthetic experience of nature until we take up the challenge to actively engage with its dynamic framelessness rather than opt for a passive enjoyment of those elements which most readily come together in a picture-postcard view. In the social aesthetics that Berleant presents as a 'kind of environmental aesthetics', he identifies the multiplicity of sites for *potential* aesthetic involvement, where here too the aesthetic may not dominate but is limited only by our willingness to participate. Similarly, art practices which do not offer us a comfortably familiar pattern of aesthetic experience also challenge us to engage more dynamically and actively with aesthetic experience.

### THE AESTHETICS OF DIALOGUE

Grant Kester's 'dialogical aesthetics', outlined in *Conversation Pieces* (2004), is an attempt to develop a theoretical framework for the aesthetic appreciation of art practices which, like the examples given, take the form of carefully planned social interactions. Like Berleant and Gablik, Kester critiques the model of sole author and autonomous art object as being of limited scope. In order to establish what might characterise a dialogue as 'aesthetic' Kester asks 'How might the position of the viewer and the object be handled differently in the context of a dialogical model of aesthetic experience? Is it possible to practice this sort of attitude in our relationships with people rather than representations?' (2004: 108).

Drawing on the work of German theorist Jurgen Habermas, Kester differentiates between 'discourse' in which the focus is on argumentation, and more instrumental and hierarchical forms of communication such as lectures or advertising. He characterises discourse as an open dialogue rather than a fixed system for the transmission of meaning, and suggests that identity is shaped and reshaped by our encounters with other subjects. In this framework discourse is understood as provisional and negotiated, and any claims to universality lie within the process rather than the knowledge generated. In participating in this discursive process we are called upon to take on and respond to others' views, leading to self-critical awareness, and thus we come to see our identities and our views as contingent and subject to change (2004: 107–115). Kester offers that the theory Habermas outlines can help us to understand art practices that are based upon listening and a dependence on intersubjectivity, where aesthetic knowledge is generated locally and consensually rather than with reference to universalising frameworks. In these art practices the artist is not an autonomous, heroic and elevated figure, but defined in terms of openness, listening and vulnerability.

Kester suggests that artists working in this way do not begin with a clearly formed creative vision which they wish to communicate didactically *to* an audience. Rather, they begin with a clear sense of their artistic identity and a desire to communicate *with* others, in a conversational mode which allows for listening as much as expressing their own view. They see their role, not as sole authors, but as catalysts, mediators and facilitators of an ongoing process. He contrasts this with studio-based object making, borrowing Freire's 'banking' analogy to describe the situation where an artist deposits meaning and significance in an art object created in the privacy of the studio, which viewers later retrieve in aesthetic contemplation of the object. According to Kester, art work which elicits some form of direct viewer interaction shifts the focus of aesthetic meaning from the artist's private creative moment of making to the social realm, to discussion, shared experiences and physical movement (2004: 52). In this view, dialogue is understood as having the potential to transform perception and understanding, and aesthetic experience is viewed as consensual, dynamic and networked, not constrained to things alone, but open to process and to collaboration.

However this view is open to the criticism that dialogic interaction, even with the best intention, is irredeemably imbued with power imbalances, for dialogue can equally be viewed as a contest of wills, and Kester has been criticised for offering a homogenous reading of 'community' (Bishop, 2004). As we have seen, artists inevitably retain a significant measure of authorial control and thus power, and, it could be argued, accrue much of the benefit from projects which further creative and career goals of little interest or benefit to other participants.

Kester's aim is to provide a more adequate framework for the aesthetic appreciation of art practices which focus on conversations and situations rather than art objects, and has no explicit environmental agenda. Berleant's intention, on the other hand, is to theorise the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments in a way that can encompass the cultural sphere. These two projects would therefore seem to be tangential. However, although they travel by different routes, both arrive at the point of asking the same question: is it possible to experience aesthetic appreciation in our relationships with other people? Both seem to think this is indeed potentially the case, although the aesthetic might not be dominant in every situation. Kester's focus is dialogical art practices where the locus of aesthetic meaning is shifted from the private to the public domain, with an emphasis on relationality, contingency, transiency, and transformative potential. As in our experience of natural environments, this is aesthetic experience we are immersed 'in' rather than looking 'at'. However, the particular environment here is not the

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natural but the social. Thus Kester's dialogical aesthetic can be understood, like Berleant's social aesthetic, as a specific *kind* of environmental aesthetic.

Within Kester's dialogical aesthetics we can experience aesthetic appreciation in our relationships with other people if these take place in the context of art, however we have seen how claims to genuine reciprocity and collaboration within this context are mitigated by the strong editorial role of the artist, and the distance between the dialogical process itself and the documentation by which means the event is brought into wider art discourse. Berleant's approach to the possibility of aesthetic experience in social relations, which outlines the specific features of a 'contextual aesthetics', is at once more systematic and more open than Kester's, applicable to art and also other social situations such as ritual, etiquette and healthy human relationships of parental care and love. Features Berleant identifies as key to this kind of aesthetic experience, such as an open and non-judgemental quality of attention, a freshness and sense of new possibilities, a sensory experience inclusive of memory, thought and imagination, and an openness to dynamic exchange, could be usefully applied to the analysis of participatory dialogical art practices such as those mentioned above.

## CONCLUSION

The unfolding debates within contemporary art criticism and environmental aesthetics have been developing new, parallel aesthetic frameworks in response to the perceived limitations of traditional aesthetics. Berleant's approach has been to extend the reach of aesthetic theory through a phenomenological reading of subject/object ontology which collapses discrete boundaries and notions of disinterestedness. This parallels debates about the relationship between art and its potentially transformative function in society, as we saw in Gablik's critique of the severing of 'art-for-art's-sake' from its wider social contexts. By unfolding aesthetics into social space, Berleant begins to develop an aesthetic theory that includes natural, cultural, and social environments and asks, like Kester, if there is an aesthetic of human relations. His detailing of the features of such an aesthetic are open to activities beyond those considered 'art' and place the aesthetic firmly within the environments most of us engage with on a daily basis. However, the 'dematerialisation' of the locus of aesthetic experience in art may, by challenging us to engage with elusive and dynamic situations, bring us to a point where the aesthetic appreciation of art and the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments no longer make such radically different demands of

us. While Kester, Gablik and Lippard focus on dialogical and participatory art, rather than natural environments, if we accept Hepburn's argument that an aesthetic experience untheorised is one which remains undeveloped, it could be argued that through learning how to aesthetically appreciate this kind of art practice we become more sensitively aware of, and thus more inclined to value, the transient, the ephemeral, the relational, the contingent, the dynamic. All of these are the qualities that Hepburn identified and celebrated as characteristic of natural environments.

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