

6. Landscape as Object

This section addresses the problematic research questions associated with the notion of the landscape¹ as an aesthetic object. We have already recognised that works of art are appreciated as *objects* separate from their surroundings isolated within a frame or other device (see Section 2.1). This containment stems at least in part from Kant's philosophical position (Kant 1790) that the aesthetic appreciation of an object of *beauty* required the adoption of a **detached** or **disinterested** stance. It is the transposition of this position to the appreciation of nature and hence of landscape and of our environment that prompts further discussion.

6.1. Aesthetic appreciation and the objectification of art and nature

The **objectification** of art and a detached **contemplative** gaze, allowing a focus on the internal attributes of the work, including the skill and originality manifest in its creation, became the foundation of the aesthetic appreciation of art. Such a position was most comfortably applied to painting and sculpture and although it was the basis of the developing discipline of modern aesthetics, it was always problematic when dealing with architecture, theatre and creative writing. Indeed, Arnold Berleant contends that the price aesthetics has paid for extending this theory of the arts beyond painting and sculpture is its plausibility. Even in the visual arts he further maintains that its appropriateness can be questioned (Berleant 1991).

6.1.1 *The aesthetics of art as object.*

Modern and contemporary art has stretched and challenged this notion of the disinterested gaze and art as object still further. Clearly, art as installation, as performance and as earthwork (Ross 1993) has moved from contemplative to experiential and to participatory in the demands it makes on the viewer. Even painting and sculpture are no longer the passive contemplated objects of traditional aesthetics. From the impressionists onwards innovative painting has drawn the viewer into the work and required their participation to complete it. Sculpture too has come down from its pedestal literally and metaphorically inviting the physical engagement of the viewer. This inappropriateness of the art as object approach to aesthetics is perhaps even more evident when looking at the appreciation of nature.

6.1.2 *The aesthetic appreciation of nature.*

Arnold Berleant and Noel Carroll (Carroll 1993) both regard the object paradigm as too exclusive:

¹ Here, though not truly synonymous, the terms environment and nature will be used as virtually interchangeable with landscape.

“... we need no longer pursue the hopeless effort to assimilate environmental appreciation to artistic satisfaction by objectifying and contemplating an object or scene of nature with a sense of disengagement.” (Berleant 1993)

Instead they advocate a return to the sublime, not the emotion of terror and power over the imagination introduced by Edmund Burke in the mid eighteenth century, but a return to some version of Kant’s original meaning of his mathematical and dynamic sublime. However, the sublime is now modified to recognise that the nature/human relationship of awe is tempered by humility as we now see ourselves as part of nature in a profound way and can no longer view it from a *safe place*. Such a view is predicated on our awareness of global environmental change and our position of both culpability and helplessness in the face of its progress.

Indeed, Donald Crawford (1993) points to a rational position contingent with this awareness. In reviewing the differences between artistic and natural beauty he considers the criticism that whereas works of art “embody or express intentions, emotions and feelings, ideas and values while nature lacks these levels of significance.” That is works of art are cultural artefacts requiring interpretation and criticism to be understood. The aesthetic appreciation of nature by this reasoning is restricted to a superficial or surface level. Crawford then poses a counter argument that natural beauty also, like works of art, possesses expressive and semantic properties that takes three main forms.

The first form is that of the deist or theist position where natural beauty is a reflection of some divine creation or purpose. This position has waned in the recent past. The second is where expression and meaning in nature is interpreted metaphorically or by analogy, endowing meaning by comparison of form, often with the human body. Lastly, the third position argues for consideration in context. Just as works of art exist and are interpreted and valued within an artistic cultural context so too does nature and this gives natural beauty a significance as great as that of art. This third position is that of the environmentalist and brings us to a brief consideration of Allan Carlson’s ***environmental aesthetics***.

Environmental aesthetics (Carlson 1979, 1993) argues for the necessity of scientific knowledge in guiding appreciation. It stands in contrast to a group of non-cognitive approaches to aesthetic appreciation of nature, which de-emphasise the role of knowledge and highlight other aspects such as imagination and emotion. This model sees beauty in nature within a wider context. That context is a deep environmental appreciation with a structural understanding of form in space and time and a functional awareness both heightening the meaning and significance aesthetically of natural phenomena. The contribution that environmental aesthetics can make to a reassessment of the appreciation of landscape art is considerable.

6.2. Objects from, of, and in the landscape as art.

We turn now from the problems of appreciating nature as object to the appreciation of natural objects derived from the landscape, or rearranged and/or placed in the landscape.

6.2.1 *Objects from and of the landscape as art.*

Material and objects appropriated from the environment and incorporated into art works on board or canvas is a relatively common device. In Section 3 when citing the large landscape/seascapes of Joan Eardley it was noted that she often incorporated grit and soil and dried grasses in her paintings.² Such works vary in the significance of their physical links with the landscape. Some artists use such materials simply to add body and texture with no explicit reference to the landscape. Many of Anselm Kiefer's large landscape works, dense and allegorical, use prodigious amounts of soil material but the reference to location is tenuous. Other works such as the mud paintings of Richard Long make specific reference to locale in the medium and its derivation even though the images created are indirect.

In the Catalan artist Anton Tàpies (Chalumeau 2004) this use of materials creates a new form of plastic language, but one that is not applied overtly to landscape and where the creative purpose in the use of materials is divorced from their origins. In the work of the Boyle family (Philpott and Tarsia 2000, Elliott, Hare and Wilson 2003)), however, location is everything, but far from using materials directly from the environment they reproduce with great fidelity the details of small portions of the Earth's surface in fibre glass and paint.

One of the exhibitors in the Northern Rock Exhibition³, Malcolm Whittaker, uses small pieces of natural materials often subtly combined with photography and painting to form intriguing framed constructions or assemblages which appear strikingly contemporary, but also have a strong sense of connecting far back in time and are indeed evocative of landscape if only indirectly. These works are referenced in my own pieces (see Cat. Nos. Concept 2, & 3.)

"My concern is centred around making complete autonomous entities, realms through which the viewer is invited to explore and experience not just the referential elements but its physical presence ... the experience of landscape is translated into the experience of painting" (Whittaker 2006)⁴

He cites archaeology, geology, museums, maps, diagrams, texts and books amongst the sources in his work. The archaeological process: scraping, finding, preparing and displaying behind glass, also mirrors the creation of Whittaker's work.

² Exponents of print media use organic material such as grasses in the production of unique papers, or use such environmental materials directly in the print process especially in colagraphs.

³ Northern Rock Exhibition

⁴ Malcolm Whittaker exhibition Hart Gallery, London 2006 (visited)

6.2.2. *Box art*

Some of Whittaker's work could be classified as box art⁵, which introduces a whole new category of work. Many of today's artists work in box formats, where collections of "things" or found objects are displayed in some form of box (Lloyd and Crawford 2002). A combination of sculpture and painting, these assemblages emphasize the part played by depth and spatial enclosure and usually include subject matter that hangs between illusion and reality. Where natural objects from the environment are involved there may be a landscape connection and narrative at work.

6.2.3. *Art in the landscape: Land Art*

The traditional landscape genre was radically transformed in the 1960s when many artists stopped merely representing the land and made their mark directly in the landscape. The range of work now referred to as **land art** and (perhaps regrettably) as **environmental art** includes a wide variety of post-war practice:

1. site-specific sculptures that utilise natural materials from the environment to create new forms or rearrange existing forms to challenge our view;
2. projects that import new unnatural objects into the natural setting with similar objectives;
3. time sensitive individual activities in the landscape;
4. socially aware collaborative interventions in the landscape.

In their weighty tome '*Land and Environmental Art*' Jeffery Kastner, and Brian Wallis (1998) group the first of these types of practice under the heading **integration** where the landscape is manipulated as a material in its own right with a *minimalist* emphasis on materiality, elemental geometry and siting (artists whose work fall into this category include: Walter de Maria, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, Andy Goldsworthy). The second they term **interruption** where manmade materials are introduced into the environment but often at a landscape scale that challenges perception and questions the definition of natural (artists whose work fall into this category include in addition to some of those already mentioned: Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Richard Long, Nancy Holt, Michael Heizer). The third type of practice is categorised as **involvement**, or individual performance or activity in the landscape, often transitory and ephemeral, the mark making, or the evidence of the artist's passage on a journey through the landscape is recorded only in text, graphic or photographic documents (artists whose work fall into this category include in addition to some of those already mentioned: Peter Hutchinson, Ana Mendieta, Hamish Fulton,

⁵ Exhibition Celebrating Boxes, the gallery @ oxo on London's South Bank (14 December 2001 -13 January 2002) (visited),

Richard Long). Works that are socially and ecologically aware and which treat the landscape as a vehicle for highlighting issues of exploitation, waste and destruction as well as perception and pleasure are termed *implementation* (artists whose work fall into this category include in addition to some of those already mentioned: Hans Haacke, Helen and Newton Harrison, Joseph Beuys, Peter Fend). Furthermore they add an additional category that they term *imagining*. Here the landscape is viewed as a construct, metaphor or signifier, a historical narrative, in short a repertoire of “potent symbols that can be deployed to describe contemporary society (artists whose work fall into this category include in addition to some of those already mentioned: Lothar Baumgarten, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Jan Dibbets). Each of the above categories is itself broad in the range of work that qualifies for inclusion, and any one *land* artist may produce work across two or more, or all of these categories.

Section 6. **Landscape and Object: Conclusions**

The first conclusion probably undermines the title of this section for it is that the notion of the contemplative gaze and the objectification of art has run its course as a dominant paradigm. True it is still relevant to some branches of the visual arts, but it is no longer ubiquitous in its appropriateness.

The second conclusion is that the debate about whether there are one or two kinds of aesthetics: an aesthetics of art and an aesthetics of nature seems destined to run and run. Equally the debate between a so called cognitive and a non-cognitive aesthetic applicable to the appreciation of nature including the landscape is at present unresolved.

To an outsider, however, these debates seem tinged with futility and it would seem far more sensible to embrace both as and when appropriate. However, the emergence of cognitive forms like Environmental Aesthetics should be welcomed as timely and informative.

If art as object is less secure, object as art seems to have a worthwhile future. It is clear that there remains scope for further creativity in engaging with the landscape as material object or with material objects taken from it.