AN INTRODUCTION TO SUSTAINABILITY AND AESTHETICS
AN INTRODUCTION TO SUSTAINABILITY AND AESTHETICS
THE ARTS AND DESIGN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

CULTURE, NATURE AND PRAXIS

Christopher Crouch

This book grew out of a symposium on the aesthetics of sustainability organised by the School of Design and Art at Curtin University in Perth, Australia. The symposium itself developed from a series of collegial conversations after a serendipitous encounter I had while out walking. On the pavement I had seen an object, radiating colour, that wasn’t immediately recognisable. There was no subsequent revelation reminiscent of William Blake for what I had found was an abandoned sticker of two pink dolphins jumping over a rainbow in a sky filled with fluffy, pale blue clouds. It lay at the foot of a lamp post, attached to which was a handmade sign advertising artificial grass and mulched car tyres (as a water saving, weed suppressing, gardening solution). It occurred to me, somewhat obviously (but that is the mundane nature of contemporary visions) that both were texts that addressed a common subject, a pleasure in and a managing of, the environment. One was embedded in a discourse of happy oceans, the other in the virtuous quest to save water in a water starved continent. Within the respective demographics for the consumption of these signs - the high school student and the local gardener – they could be read as positive and progressive. Addressed from a broader urban perspective of seemingly unending hot weather though, both were riddled with disturbing contradictions; a scrambled, fictional ocean ecology was matched with the horror of a garden stinking of recycled rubber debris at the height of summer. Both had an aesthetic dimension, no matter how tawdry, and aspirations of an ethical duty of care, no matter how tangential, could be ascribed to both. They revealed in their rhetoric the chaos in the relationship between creating and expressing happiness in the material world. These seemingly insignificant traces of a globally polluting, carbon based economy manifested a desire for order and joy. How could these aspirations for stability and beauty be framed within the bigger context of an island continent severely impacted upon by climate change?

Our collegial conversations built over a few weeks, and began to settle into a set of questions that asked whether in this time of environmental crisis there were a coherent set of aesthetic signs and dialogues to match the current scientific discourse. Could the aesthetic offer a way of analysing an ecosystem in crisis (1) where the aesthetic subsequently becomes an active agent in remodeling it? If so, what might the dialogue between the aesthetic and sustainability be like and how might it be constituted? Inherent in these questions was the idea of the aesthetic being more than just a personal response to beauty and becoming a dynamo of social change.

The chapters that follow in this book address the issue of sustainability and aesthetics framed through policy and practice, and from institutional and personal perspectives. It would be foolish to pretend that the world and our grasp of it is anything other than fluid, transitional and liminal. Thus the tenor of the book is transdisciplinary and culturally diverse, its intention is to act as an introduction to the subject and to report back on what is happening through a variety of authorial and theoretical lenses. It is inevitable that where authors seem to provide ‘solutions’ they will often contradicted in other chapters. This contestation is healthy and should be embraced, for as Vandana Shiva (1997) has observed, cultural and biological diversity are intimately related. Before outlining the structure of the book and its contents at the end of this chapter, I wish to establish the broader contexts in which the book’s debates about sustainability and the aesthetic are embedded.
Framing cultural relationships
Sustainable aesthetics relate to the designed world and the world of the imagination as well as the environment. In thinking about the role of the aesthetic in a quest for sustainability it is necessary to embrace the dynamic relationship between nature and culture. In modelling some examples of aestheticising (the making of and philosophising about, sensory and critical judgements on art and nature) that will be explored in more detail later, I want to examine the idea that whilst there are shared physiological responses to the world, the way in which those responses are organised and understood are social and therefore mutable.

Perhaps the best way to conceive of the formation and maintenance of an aesthetic system is to borrow and adapt from Bourdieu’s habitus/field model (Bourdieu, 1977). In this sociological model the individual habitus is bound up in lived and embodied experiences. Intensely personal, the formation of habitus (in the case of our discussion, the formation of an aesthetic sensibility) is framed through activity in the wider field of (aesthetic) practice and the individual’s relationship with that activity. Sometimes the individual benefits from that engagement, sometimes the individual is persuaded by the practices in the field that adopting its values are beneficial to the individual despite evidence to the contrary. This is what Bourdieu calls misrecognition (1992, pp. 167-168). If we return to the ecstatic pink dolphin sticker it is possible to model it as an example of misrecognition in the negotiation between habitus and field and to reflect on how misrecognition at an aesthetic level has profound implications beyond the aesthetic experience. The sticker’s role as an object emerging from the field of mass production is to act as a signifier for an engagement with nature, both for the consumer of the sticker and to the consumer’s peer group. Within the habitus of the consumer the sticker is beautiful and demonstrates, at least, an affiliation with oceans, rainbows, the sky, dolphins and pinkness. Within the field of mass production the sticker’s aesthetic role is to secure monetary exchange in favour of the producer in an act of purchase. The sticker is akin to the fly fisherman’s crafted lure, a (destructive) fiction created for the benefit of the fisherman rather than the fish, in which the fish is enthusiastically complicit. The uneven relationship with the natural world that is mediated by practices within consumer culture has huge implications for the formation and application of aesthetic systems, and for an aesthetic of sustainability particularly.

It could be argued that there is no single unified field of (aesthetic) practice, rather a multitude of practices existing in parallel and overlapping. This explains how multiple, sometimes contradictory, value systems can co-exist, even within an individual’s habitus. Other ways in which the negotiations between culture and nature can be characterised are by framing them through Jürgen Habermas’ idea of the individual’s ‘lifeworld’ being colonised by external social systems (McAfee, 2000, p. 26) or Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony (Crehan, 2002, pp. 199-200). No matter what philosophical or theoretical lens one uses to describe the process, at the heart of the conversation between human-kind and nature lies the fundamental issue that objective conditions are subjectively interpreted, and this subjective framing create values that are contingent upon the dominant discourse in the field.

This is not to deny the importance of our shared physiological responses to the natural world and the way in which we understand it through embodied experiences (2). Certain temperatures, sound and light can provoke common pleasurable or unpleasant physical and emotional responses to them but as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed thirty years ago (and reaffirmed through research since (Tay, 2013, pp. 18-20; Becker, 1997) embodied knowledge is expressed through metaphor, and metaphor is culture at work (Kövecses, 2005). Consequently whilst we all share embodied experiences, our understanding and expression of them is framed by cultural circumstances, and it follows that our perception of the physical reality of the natural world can have different meanings depending on the cultural framework through which it was approached or understood. Looking at the debates around the custodianship of the Australian Great Barrier Reef can help illustrate this point. The reef is a coral growth of enormous proportions in the ocean off the east coast of Australia (Hutchings, Kingsford &
Hoegh-Guldberg, 2008). It is currently under threat of destruction caused principally by rising global temperatures and poor management (Caldicott & Halter, 2014) and is the subject of a number of overlapping fields of practice. For the purposes of this argument the fields of practice are the governmental, the aesthetic, and the economic. It is possible to trace the change in discourse within these fields that allowed the reef to abruptly transition from an Australian national treasure to an impediment to coal mining.

In 2013 the Great Barrier Reef was the focus of a governmental analysis to acknowledge and assess its aesthetic value. At this time within the field of governmental custodianship it was constructed as a community asset, and in the report was ascribed with the experiential attributes of having “a sense of beauty”, “a sense of naturalness” and “a sense of remoteness” all of which contributed to its “exceptional natural beauty … associated with contrasting colours and forms of green islands, coastlines, sweeping white sands, fringing reefs and patterns of blue waters” (Defining the aesthetic value of the Great Barrier Reef, 2013). In 2014, a change of government and a change in practices re-framed the reef, not aesthetically but economically (Redfearn, 2014). In the fresh interpretation, sustaining the reef’s pristine environment would have meant the curtailing and hindering of the development of coastal mining. The reef’s potential destruction as a result of coal mining could now be countenanced within the field of economic practices, the aesthetic values previously ascribed to it by one government easily discarded by another. What this demonstrates is that to assert that there is a shared, universal aesthetic appreciation of the world is to adopt a position that is at odds with the evidence of how aesthetic value is ascribed and acted upon (Lanz, 1947; Crowley, 1958; McManus & Furnham, 2006).

What is sustainability?
The aesthetic is one way in which the interpretation of nature takes place. What of nature’s broader relationship with culture? How might the contemporary ecological crisis and the concept of sustainability be framed culturally?

Sustainability’s colloquial meaning conveys a concern and interest in maintaining the stability of the environment, and it has become synonymous with what used to be known as environmentalism, though one does not have to do much reading to enter the world of ideological struggles over the use of the terms (Guha, 2000; Pepper, Revel & Webster, 2002). In the history of modernity, as finite natural resources disappeared (Konijnendijk, 2008), many viewed the impact upon nature by industrialisation with alarm. It is true that the new carbon fuelled economies exacerbated and speeded up the degradation of the natural environment, but it is overly simplistic to reduce this process down to a binary opposition between modernity and tradition. Over grazing by herd animals and deforestation by pre-industrial societies is well documented (Kaplan et al, 2009), as is the negative impact on the environment by those pre-industrial societies with a cultural attitude that constructed nature as boundless (Duguid, 2010). Nevertheless in the 19th century the sustainable management of land became synonymous with both a nostalgia for a halcyon rural past and the adoption of socially progressive ideals; fields of practice, as always, overlapping.

As the modern nation states industrialised, so each nation built its own history and strategy in managing the natural reserves within its boundaries. The conservation movement in 19th century Britain was a pragmatic one (Evans, 2002) sitting alongside, and sometimes engaging with, the more idealistic Arts and Crafts Movement. This movement provided a new set of critical discourses and visual signs about the natural and the vernacular, well represented by the artist Walter Crane in his woodcut celebrating May Day 1893, where an unfurling banner declares that ‘The plough is a better backbone than the factory’ (Figure 1).
Figure 1: *A garland for Mayday.* Walter Crane. 1895. (Private collection).
Before the full onslaught of Stalinist policies promoting heavy industry, the young industrialising USSR nevertheless reaffirmed the provision of zapovedniki, inviolable nature reserves (Josephson et al., 2013), and Lenin argued for a new relationship between town and country as the collapse of the consumer economy changed the nature of cities as places for recreational consumerism (Wells, 2005, p. 190). On the other side of the world in Australia, Arthur Streeton working within a painterly tradition of romancing the pastoralisation of the national landscape (Hoorn, 2007), increasingly painted the bleak transformation of the landscape as forests disappeared. In 1940 he painted the desolate Sylvan Dam in Donna Buang, AD 2000, a vision of a lifeless and eroded Australia. Similar examples can be drawn from every society experiencing the circumstances of modernity.

The historical construction of an agricultural/industrial dialectic where an untainted agriculture was seen as in opposition to industry had always been a fiction, but it wasn’t until after WWII that it was fully acknowledged by governments that the condition of modernity implied the complete industrialisation of nature itself (Tsakok, 2011, pp. 15 – 35). This often reluctant acknowledgement by industry and government of scientific insights into the condition of the natural world slowly led to the establishment of a framework for conceptualising global sustainable development, and can be marked by a number of events. The 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s book Silent spring and its subsequent influence can be seen as a symbolic marker of the acknowledgment that the natural world had been frighteningly damaged, and it placed an idea that had previously been considered subversive into the mainstream (Lytle, 2007). As a result of the furore caused by the book’s publication, within a decade most industrial states had environmental regulations of varying degrees of rigour in place. The United Nations Environment Programme was established in 1972 and global non-governmental organisations like the World Wide Fund for Nature (1961), Friends of the Earth (1969), and Greenpeace (1971) created an institutional environment in which the social antagonisms caused by the abuse of the natural world could be articulated and acted upon.

The term ‘sustainable development’ became institutionalised after the publication of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development’s (UNCED) report Our common future, more commonly known as the Brundtland Report. The report was undertaken to examine the critical issue of environmental erosion caused by indiscriminate industrial and consumer development, with the intention of finding pragmatic ways of dealing with it. What emerged from the commission’s deliberations was a formal acknowledgement that in a globalising economy there was a need to strengthen international cooperation to instigate new patterns of behaviour. The report called for a raising of consciousness about the interrelationship between economic growth and the environment at personal, government and non-government, local and international levels (Our common future, 1987, p. 247). The report proposed that development should be designed to meet the demands of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. This theme was picked up by the UNCED Rio Summit in 1992 where the need to protect the ecosystem was asserted in the Rio declaration on environment and development. Principle 1 asserts that “[h]uman beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature”. This was further qualified by principle 22 that proposed that Indigenous people and their communities “have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices” (1992). This can be interpreted in two ways; one is positive, the other is more ambivalent.

Positively, there is an acknowledgement of a human/nature relationship that is harmonious and which is mutually beneficial. This is as much an aesthetic aspiration as it is a scientific observation. By implication principle 22 further suggests that there was a pre-industrial way of knowing the natural world, and this has hugely beneficial implications for understanding the world in different aesthetic ways. However, less reassuring is the continuing elision between the differences between sustainability on one hand and development on the other. Is it realistic to assume that development is a given, and
can be reconciled with a sustainable natural world? At the heart of the notion of sustainable development is the unresolved relationship the globalising economy has with consumer culture.

The philosopher Arne Naess confronts this problem by proposing a radically different relationship with nature, where its usefulness to human culture – so central to sustainable development – is put to one side and the nonhuman world is celebrated for what it is (Naess, 1989, p. 164). This ‘deep ecological’ perspective involves a radical curtailment of human growth, and development is limited only to what is absolutely vital in order to sustain the functionality of human societies. The mutuality of this relationship is that a secure ecosystem is better able to support a fulfilling human life. The proposal that “the flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population” (Sessions & Naess, 1989) has political ramifications that would impact upon social and cultural activity that are beyond this introduction, but the aesthetic implications of Naesse’s position imply a profound immersion into the workings of nature itself and an experiential dialogue with natural structures. Thus, living becomes an endlessly reflexive aesthetic and ethical engagement with the natural world.

Still with one foot in a critical, humanist tradition, Serge Latouche argues for décroissance, translatable, somewhat inelegantly, as de-growth. Décroissance is not negative growth, but rather a concept of non-growth or a-growth in which it is possible to unfold a vision of a world that might emerge after post-development politics. In this world the population works less, consumes less and lives more fully in terms of emotional and intellectual experiences because of its dis-engagement with the ideological paradigms of consumer culture (2009, p. 9). Latouche frames an intellectual, political, cultural and social position between sustainable development on one hand and ecocentrism on the other and challenges the supposition that there is an imperative to choose between “ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, humanism and antispeciesism, absolute relativism and dogmatic universalism, and modernity and tradition” (2009, p. 98). For Latouche these binaries are diversionary, and there is a need to get “away from these old debates, which are interconnected and recurrent” because, in his opinion, they can never be resolved one way or the other (2009, p. 98). At the centre of Latouche’s approach is an attempt, not to reconcile, but to expose and manage the conceptual and structural contradiction of “sustainable” development. The aesthetic dimension of Latouche’s ideas of frugal abundance has yet to be mapped, but backing away from current models of economic production and the reduction of consumption must imply different ways of thinking about materials, things and travel as well as the nature of the world and how we experience it. Décroissance might also be thought of in relation to the slow movement that started as a reaction to industrialised food production in the 1980s (Osbaldeston, 2013) where it challenged the concept of instant gratification. The idea of slowing the pace of life down to allow reflection has now seeped into most aspects of cultural life including urban development (Newman & Jennings, pp. 195 – 199). The slow movement provides a set of new paradigms of cultural behaviours which have huge possibilities for an aesthetic of sustainability, such as The clock of the long now, a project for a clock that will keep time accurately for the next millennium (Brand, 1999).

In Farewell to growth, Latouche argues the difference between universalist ideology and the idea of universality, suggesting the former is a type of totalitarianism and the latter ripe for recasting as a kind of ‘pluriversalism’ (2009, p. 102). This allows for an aesthetic approach to the world that at once is both specifically rooted in a sense of place, and yet allows for other conceptions of what that might constitute. This then permits a productive cultural relativism and the slow erosion of the divide between nature and culture instigated by modernity. It further promotes a considered reflexive relationship to nature, which has changed continuously through history and will continue to change.

The nature of the world is to change, and yet no matter how often that truism is repeated from Heraclitus to Marx, it seems beyond our collective abilities to work pragmatically with that idea. The forest was once a feared place. Its edges were a liminal space between civilisation and chaos before the romantics turned the woodland glade into a space for contemplation. The sublime nature of the
ocean, which was once represented by tales of its turbulent surface, is now better expressed by its depths. It follows that the Western, Christian, and Modern ways in which the natural world was understood, and which have a powerful legacy in the contemporary global economy, now have the potential to be replaced with approaches which are not about dominion and ownership and which open up a new ethical dimension in our relationship with the natural world and its ecosystem.

Unravelling the aesthetic
I have already suggested that the aesthetic is relational and contingent. I would qualify that by saying that it also has a potential to be shared and thus it has relevance, and (temporary) stability, to those that share it. What constitutes the nature of an aesthetic relationship between the individual and the object, and how that is articulated between individuals about the object has as many definitions as there are philosophers, and there are as many philosophers as there are competing value systems across and within the world’s cultures. By briefly marking out some mainstream paradigms and theoretical models of the aesthetic it is possible to map out the dynamic relationship between the personal and social function of the aesthetic. The main intention is to suggest that the fluid nature of the aesthetic – by which is meant the shift in notions of what beauty is, and expectations of how it impacts upon us - facilitates an understanding of what an aesthetic of the sustainable might be and do.

In using the word *kalon*, Plato made no clear distinction between what might be considered beautiful and what might be considered admirable (Lear, 2012). This elision of meaning between sensuous pleasure and worthiness isn’t just a linguistic curiosity, confusion between what we would now identify as two different sets of discourse, but an indicator that the ways in which we might think of beauty contemporaneously has a very particular cultural framing. In a contemporary colloquial Australian setting, and I would hazard a guess that it is the same in the whole Anglosphere, aesthetic pleasure is about self fulfillment framed mostly within a consumer culture. What Jameson described as the ‘perpetual present’ of late capitalism (Jameson, 2008) precludes a sense of either personal or historical consequences for personal action, for if one exists solely in the ‘now’ of consumption, the past and future are conceivable only in terms of things discarded and things to be desired. Although Debord’s *Society of the spectacle* which was first published in 1967 is now a venerable text, his observation about the consumerist spectacle manifesting itself as positive, inevitable and untouchable so that “[e]verything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear”, still sums up the seeming impossibility of critical reflexivity within the circulatory nature of capitalism (1994, para. 12). One powerful way this mindset can be short-circuited is by posing questions about the ethical viability of consumer capitalism. Implicit in the idea of kalon is the seed of principled engagement that sits within the notion of worthiness. We can draw from Plato the sense that beauty might need to have a purpose as well as give pleasure. This does not have to be oppressively didactic, just self actualising. It isn’t difficult within the context of the current environmental chaos to imagine an aesthetic of sustainability that is emancipatory as well as pleasurable, and that there is pleasure to be gained in participating together in celebrating the healthy functioning of human society within a healthy ecosystem.

The modern European journey in unravelling what the aesthetic might be, started with Alexander Baumgarten’s philosophical investigation into sensual cognition and the idea of ‘thinking beautifully’, but it is with the publication of Kant’s *Critique of judgement* in 1790 that the aesthetic began to be applied to nature as well as to art, and the ability to judge something as beautiful or artistic becomes a subject of investigation. Allow me for the sake of argument to pluck just one Kantian notion about beauty from the interlocking network of his ideas (Guyer, 1996). For Kant beauty was diminished if it possessed what he called adherent rather than free beauty. So, he explains, a flower has a pure (free) beauty that is unconnected to purpose. As such it possesses an independent beauty that is different from a building’s beauty whose impure (adherent) beauty is connected to its use. What is intriguing about this definition of beauty is threefold, and I wish to return to the brief modelling of the habi-
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tatus/field relationship raised earlier. Firstly, this definition splits the ancient concept of kalon; worthiness, purpose or use has been differentiated from an autonomous, pure, sensuous way of knowing. This implies that differing fields of practice engage with beauty differently. Secondly, by suggesting that there are two ways of experiencing beauty, it refutes the unity of an aesthetic response; how can there be unity if beauty exists in a form that can then be changed through subsequent knowledge of the object? Thirdly, it follows that notions of beauty are not solely constructed in relation to the objects themselves but also to the judgements made about them. If there is a dynamic power relationship between habitus and field in which ‘acting’ and ‘acting upon’ is evident in the framing and development of ideas, then notions of beauty are also subject to dialogic and material change; it makes no difference whether these notions are about artifacts or nature itself.

The debates surrounding aesthetics post Kant in the West are multitudinous (Bowie, 1995; Jamme & Cooper, 2013) but what might be of particular relevance to this book is a brief mention of the fraught historical relationship between art and nature. It took several hundred years before nature could be viewed outside the framework of its relationship with art, and to be seen as autonomously beautiful. The 18th century notion of the picturesque codified the way nature might be appreciated by constructing views of the landscape using ideas of beauty generated originally within the artistic field of practice (Robinson, 1991). By necessity these views had to be modified as the landscape was rapidly transformed by industrialisation in the 19th century (Copley & Garside, 1994) but the Western framing of nature through the lens of art wasn’t really challenged until the development of an environmental aesthetics (Rolston, 1998) that encouraged an understanding of nature – nature like swamps and wetlands - that sat outside the usual models of artistic appreciation (Giblett, 1996). To free the natural world from the aesthetic expectations of European art practices is also to free us of many other assumptions about how the world should be understood.

The Western aesthetic tradition is only one of the world’s cultural systems, all of which have been inevitably modified by industrialisation as the globalised economy impacts upon traditional social orders and the natural world. Modernity is both a historical period and a social condition and as different cultures industrialise at different points along the timeline of industrial development, negotiation is constantly taking place between traditional and contemporary notions of nature. These are values laden dialogues in which verdicts about how we live our lives are made. The ancient Chinese Taoist approach to nature, perhaps best exemplified in the writings of Chuang-tzu where he encourages an approach to the world that mirrors nature’s “spontaneous and mindless” journeying (Watson, 2002, p. 6), was part of the suffocating “iron house” of traditional culture challenged by Chinese modernists like Lu Xun (1972, p. 5) at the start of the 20th century. Lu Xun had studied the natural sciences, briefly training as a doctor before he became a writer, and was an antagonist of bogus traditional Chinese medicinal cures (3). His understanding of the body’s physiology would have led him to dismiss Chuang-tzu’s medicinal advice to take monkshood, balloon flower, cockscomb and china root as “each has a time when it is the sovereign remedy” (Watson, 2002, p. 277) and yet he would have understood the metaphorical insights into the nature of medicine provided by this observation. The need to move backwards and forwards between pre and postindustrial knowledges and between individual and social bodies of practice is an example of how Latouche’s pluriversal approach might work, and it is possible to model a contemporary aesthetic response to nature in this way. It is also through a critically reflexive approach to the pre-industrial that allows movement beyond the aesthetic fetishising of the indigenous and/or the appropriation of traditional practices.

Henri Lefebvre suggested that in late capitalist society “everyday life has lost a dimension: depth. Only triviality remains” (2002, p. 78). If life is to be expanded out from a “congealed form of living” (p. 217) manifest in the reduction of aesthetic experience down into individual acts of consumption, then for Lefebvre the way to achieve life’s expansion from ‘lived’ (passive) to ‘living’ (active) is to embrace the aesthetic potential of embracing everyday social activity outside of acts of consumption.
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The aesthetic sensibilities we perceive operating in the past, or in cultures outside of our own, are not something we can adopt other than superficially, because they are the lived experiences of others that we codify as outsiders looking in (p. 322). There is an important and enjoyable role for beautiful things in life, but to pick and choose a cultural aesthetic as one might choose clothing is to consume the surface residue of culture. Ascribing aesthetic value to the trace of action rather than to the act itself is also to deny the power relationships that are at play in either the forging of an aesthetic or the adoption of one (Young and Brunk, 2009). This has enormous implications for principle 22 of the Rio Declaration’s proposal that Indigenous people and their communities have a vital role to play in deploying their knowledge and traditional practices (Rio declaration on environment and development, 1992). To whom does that information belong and who has the responsibility for the deployment of it? Aesthetics are not conjured up Prospero like, from out the empty air.

The most recent philosophising about the autonomy of nature as a realm outside of the human (Heyd, 2013) also requires a need to qualify that recognition with practices that protect nature and ensure its survival. If nature’s integrity has to be has to be impinged upon by the need to live our lives, what are the ethical issues that emerge from this practical human/nature engagement? A worldview that sees maintaining the integrity of nature as a social and cultural objective will eventually create an economy that is driven by the need for environmental protection. This in turn will frame an everyday aesthetic. The aesthetics of the everyday are social aesthetics formed by patterns of consumption and behaviours. Social aesthetics emphasise and shape things and processes, creating new meanings and interpretations. They are about relationships between people, and people and things, and those relationships are also the power relationships that take place between habitus and field.

To adopt the values and logic of everyday aesthetics in order to ‘think beautifully’ is to reinforce the idea that the aesthetic is contingent and contested. It would appear that an aesthetic of the sustainable might emerge through social action framed by a re-negotiation of our relationship with nature. It might even be legitimate to suggest that any such action might be better described as possessing the quality of kalon rather than beauty.

Praxis

Praxis is the dynamic relationship between thinking and acting and evaluating the consequences of action, and it is at this point that I hand the book over to the contributors. The aesthetic contestation needed to instigate a new aesthetic of sustainability involves more than reflecting on the beauty of nature or on the beauty of things produced in a sustainable culture. It involves a quotidian re-thinking of materials and their origin, their processing, their design into objects, their distribution and use, their life span and final disposal. There are aesthetic ramifications in managing landscape and the urban environment, there is a need to consider how transitioning from an unsustainable culture of planned obsolescence to a sustainable one involves re-conceptualising the role of making art, and thinking about art and its purposes. Those issues are best discussed by those engaged in that process.

The book has been divided into two parts, the first looks at the central question of the book through the lens of philosophy, art and literature, the second through design and the environment. The book concludes with an afterword by John Thackara, who was the keynote speaker at the original symposium in Perth and whose presence in the global debates about design and its purpose gives constant reassurance that progressive ideas can make an impact on how the world is conceived and acted upon.

The division of the book into two parts shouldn’t be seen as a reason for a discipline specific reading of it however, for whilst the chapters are gathered together in subject groupings for ease of organisation, there are underlying themes and threads that run across and through the subject matter of each chapter.
An Introduction to Sustainability and Aesthetics

Hulin Sun, Amzad Hossain and Dora Marinova, Julia Sowińska-Heim and Hoda Shahmohammadian and Samaneh Soltanzadeh’s papers deal with Chinese aesthetics in suburban Australian gardens, rural life in Bangladesh, Polish post-communist architecture and the ancient Iranian desert city of Yazd. What links these disparate subjects together is not solely the issue of sustainability. What is an implicit part of their analyses (and in Huilin Sun’s case explicitly so) is an engagement with the pre-industrial aesthetics that have deep roots in the social, ethical and spiritual beliefs of societies whether they are Taoist, Christian or Islamic. Part of the creation of an aesthetic of sustainability must be a sustained dialogue between the different ideological ways of understanding the world that are in existence and the body of scientific knowledge that we also possess.

The nature of embodied knowledge and how it is acquired and how it may be communicated rests at the centre of re-imagining our world and our relationship with it. Sacha Kagan’s paper discusses the nature of a sustainable aesthetic from a theoretical perspective and Perdita Phillips from the perspective of a practitioner. To understand the movement of ideas and ideology between habitus and field, between lifeworld and system, is to realise the importance of how embodied personal knowledge fits into broader theoretical frameworks. This insight is in turn important in finding ways to communicate how aesthetic sensibilities are expressed, as do Erin Corderoy and Michaela Baker in their examination of Tim Winton’s novel Dirt Music and the ways in which we might reflect on the qualities of materials as Martina Novakova and Tony Lam. Mariela Zingoni talks about beauty as a way of knowing and John Ryan delves into an historical understanding of the forming of aesthetic sensibilities that is focused on flora. Both these approaches argue not only for the necessity of aesthetic experience but their potential for transforming our understanding of the world. Aesthetic readings have the potential to influence multiple practices, for as Ryan says they “help the designers, planners, conservationists, ecologists, architects and educators of today create the pleasurable metropolitan landscapes of tomorrow”. Thus it becomes possible to link an analysis of how the beauty of flowers is understood with the practicalities of town and landscape planning that Marayam Izadi reveals is possible through the use of transects.

To construct a cultural space that is sustainably productive and aesthetically pleasurable it is important for creative individuals to reflexively engage with their creative practices and processes whether that be through an examination of broad theoretical imperatives operating in the field as Jane Donlin does, or through the framing of habitus experiences as in the case of Andrea Wood. Equally it is important to understand the purpose of creative process, as Susie Waller shows, in terms of social dynamics from both an etic as well as an emic perspective.

The world of culture rests between the uneasy relationship between creativity and regulation (Bauman, 1999, p. xiv). This dialectic will lie at the heart of any attempt to model an aesthetic of sustainability. Culture is about the discipline of maintenance as well as the excitement of invention. It is about discovering new ways of thinking, but also ways of consolidating how new things are known and learnt to be beautiful. Fanke Peng and Peter Hill’s chapter on fashion and John Sadar and Gyungju Chyon’s chapter on how technology and nature can be intimately connected show that a sustainable culture does not have to be a deficit culture and that filling the gaps left by the disappearance of an old order can be done seamlessly, and importantly for the context of this book, beautifully.

The importance of regulation, of examining how things are done, the impact they have and how judgements can be made about their value is the foundation of a scientific culture. Regulation is not just about control, it is about understanding contexts and assessing them. Reporting on practices in the field through the lenses of sustainability and the aesthetic will always be important. Eko Pam’s paper on retail aesthetics, Henry Skate and Peter Woods’ on visions of the future, Chrissie Smith’s on advertising and Johanna Neissner’s on graphic design’s practices demonstrate this. The examination and regulation of what we produce is not about curtailing freedoms, it is about realising how fragile any system is and how a healthy culture needs constant monitoring and interpretation. Regulation
does not have to be a denial of change, or the negation of fluidity, it can be the celebration of acknowledging the social importance of change.

Zygmunt Bauman observes that culture is simultaneously the factory of identity and its shelter (1999, p. xxix) in which case an imagined community can eventually become a field of practice. Those who see the potential of a sustainable world and understand how ‘thinking beautifully’ and kalon are ways of forging that world are welcomed to the following pages.

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Endnotes
1. It may seem strange to substantiate this point, but given the hostility of powerful media and political factions in acknowledging the current environmental crisis it is worth pointing the reader to the website of the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change’s website as a useful resource for countering denialist arguments with scientific data. http://www.ipcc.ch/
2. I don’t have space to examine the phenomenological aspects of aesthetics here but would recommend Sepp and Embree’s Handbook of phenomenological aesthetics as a good resource.
3. As can be seen in his short story ‘Medicine’ where a rice roll dipped in blood is used to ‘cure’ TB. (Xun, 1972).

References
AN INTRODUCTION TO SUSTAINABILITY AND AESTHETICS


PART ONE. PHILOSOPHY, ART AND LITERATURE
CHAPTER ONE

COMPLEXITY AS EXPERIENCE:
THE CONTRIBUTION OF AESTHETICS TO CULTURES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sacha Kagan

Transduction

Rather than an introduction, I prefer to label the start of this text as a ‘transduction’. A transduction is the action of conversion of matter, energy or a message into another form. More specifically in medicine, transduction refers to “the transfer of genetic material from one organism (as a bacterium) to another by a genetic vector and especially a bacteriophage” (www.merriam-webster.com). Transduction has more to do with transformation processes than does introduction, i.e. merely bringing something into play in a given context. My suggested transduction is to take some Deweyian aesthetics, as well as some complexity research (and some other material I will discuss below), and invite you to virally transfer them into the field of sustainability studies. Hence the title of this chapter: ‘Complexity as Experience’.

“Art as experience”, as proposed by John Dewey eighty years ago, characterises aesthetics as an intense and rich relationship with the world, which we can sometimes experience in everyday life (Dewey, 1934). According to Dewey, the aesthetic experience is an integrated experience manifesting connectedness and a “sense of the including whole”. Dewey’s understanding of aesthetics as experience, points at personal affectivity in everyday life and at a human being’s overall interrelationship with his/her environment. “Experience is the result, the sign and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication” (Dewey, 1934, p. 22).

Echoing Dewey’s expression, I suggest that we look into “complexity as experience”. Complexity as experience, I will argue here, characterises a specific type of aesthetic experience: “aesthetics of sustainability”. Here, aesthetic experience becomes a tense and complex relationship with the present world a world characterised by the evolutionary challenge of the Anthropocene. In other words, aesthetics of sustainability confront us with the challenge of finding prospects for the resilience of human communities, in an age where we cannot afford anymore to perceive nature and culture through simplified schemes.

Before I move further, let me shortly explain two terms, “resilience” and “Anthropocene”. Sustainability researchers often point at the importance of fostering the resilience of communities. In other words, how best to survive serious crises with a combination of adaptation and also some degree of resistance, when faced with external and internal threats. For example, in discussions on sustainable cities, several authors stress that, “building resilience depends on nurturing diversity, self-organization, adaptive learning and constructive positive feedback loops between the economic, social and infrastructural aspects of a city as a complex system” (Dieleman 2013, p. 174). On a wider scale, resilience is about averting the extinction of the human species.

The Anthropocene is a new geological period, proposed by Paul Crutzen to have started with the industrial revolution (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). In the Anthropocene, humankind has become a major geological factor deeply affecting the evolving conditions for the co-evolution of humans and many other species on planet Earth. This should not be misunderstood as meaning that humans are