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From Environmental Aesthetics to Narratives of Change

Nathalie Blanc

Abstract

Environmental aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that originated in the English-speaking world and is developing in France. It aims to take a new look at how relationships with the environment are constructed. Often addressed from a landscaping, technical or scientific angle, such relationships have remained largely unaddressed from a cultural perspective, i.e., one that includes a series of practices and values that represent a human group. In this article, I will address environmental aesthetics and how they point up tensions between fixed and static visual representations of the environment in the future and representations that can accommodate ordinary encounters, relationships in the form of narratives, "life productions," anecdotes, and constantly changing values.^[1]

Key Words

environmental aesthetics, narratives of change, ordinary life, visual environment

I will begin by introducing one way of approaching environmental aesthetics; then I will advance a renewed interpretation of the environment; and, finally, I will describe a reading of the environment which conditions sustainable writing, i.e., taking into consideration the cycles and trends that underpin people's attachment to places in the present and the relationship with urban nature in the creation of environments.

My aim is to be programmatic and to set out research pointers, some of which are already being explored. This work as such benefits from many existing contracts and on-going research around the topic of nature in the city,^[2] environmental aesthetics^[3] and art and the environment. Recent research into inhabitants' occupation of living spaces^[4] and urban green corridors^[5] has focused on the relationships between the occupation of ordinary living spaces and urban policies.

1. One possible approach to environmental aesthetics

Environmental aesthetics is a science that seeks to determine the factors that shape our understanding of and the creation of natural and built environments which produce an aesthetic type of satisfaction. It also strives to better understand the intricacies of contemporary aesthetics with regard to the construction of the environment. Environmental aesthetics as such aims to determine how a feeling of community emerges through the creation of a shared aesthetic of the environment. Aesthetics is part of the social processes that associate knowledge, reflexivity, and communication. In this sense, it is a matter of seeing which types of aesthetic (or ethical) challenges are at work in the contemporary fabrication and contemplation of environments.

The environment and the various agents involved in its production are indeed central to the creation of contemporary societies. This

is true in the sense that they create a new vision of an inhabited world: the Earth as a globalized complex exists in the economic and commercial sphere, in the realm of migrations and exchanges in human, animal and plant populations and, finally, from an ecological perspective and in terms of the “finiteness” of a space.

As the product of a humanity that is increasingly aware of its biological-physical-chemical dimensions in relation to its living space, the Earth – headquarters of a new urban species – is developing into a series of urban entities. Scientific ecology has, of course, pointed up one way that nature works, but political ecology needs to experiment with its political, social and cultural dimensions.

Seen as such, environmental aesthetics is part of a predominantly English-language based school of research inspired by the philosophies of nature.^[6] Current research into environmental aesthetics in France is useful for addressing sensory relationships with the city and helps to process and interpret field data. For over three decades environmental aesthetics has focused on topics such as nature,^[7] landscape,^[8] urban space,^[9] and everyday life;^[10] it uses different strategies to understand the values forged by the human community with regard to its environment, however, it has focused very little on art. Such strategies can serve as frameworks when analyzing the values deployed by the inhabitant-actors encountered. As such, both so-called “cognitive^[11] and “non-cognitive”^[12] assessments, those focused on the role of imagination^[13] and those which involve the role of narrative^[14] are taken into account. These latter assessments, which are part of the “non-cognitive” tradition, place value on things like perception, imagination, pleasure, vernacular narrative, oral tradition and folklore. Preference is given to the ordinary environment, people and their attachment to places, over extraordinary nature and a detached and spectacular distancing: e.g., the North Pole, the Amazon. To this we can add the most recent developments in aesthetics with the introduction of ethics^[15] and the relationship between aesthetics and politics.^[16] Environmental aesthetics is indeed synonymous with active involvement.

Our research as such reflects analyses of the relationships of dependence which exist between different parts of the environment and the human beings who inhabit it. What role is given to the intentions, control, and reciprocally-exerted power, symmetrical or otherwise, that urban beings attribute to the forces of the world that surround, invade or abandon them? The environment, both as an ordinary environment and as it is understood in public policy and individual and collective mobilization, possesses agency, i.e. the ability to affect the individuals and groups living in its midst. Whether a human, animal or object,^[17] an agent is defined as something with the ability to initiate or influence events in its close surroundings.

For example, an animal can instigate social interactions, as our interview with one Parisian woman revealed:

Here the cats create a whole network of conviviality.

Why is an animal needed to create social ties? What type of social ties can an animal create between people who do not know each other? The only thing they have in common is the cat or dog. Here, when our neighbors visit us, we talk about Leo the cat. To

make small talk we chat about the cat, about what he's done recently, just like we would talk about the person next door. It is the neighborhood pet.

The agency placed on the cat as an element of the environment and its features is directly connected to the way it is defined aesthetically (shape, color, style, rhythm, makeup, etc.).

Another example is the cockroach or *Blatella*,^[18] which is defined by the repulsion it creates. Our research in neighborhoods comprised of social housing and other more prosperous areas revealed that imagination, metaphors, and anecdotes are the most common means of sharing living space with this animal which inevitably draws upon references to poorly-managed or even run-down cities, a lack of nature, or nasty surroundings.^[19]

This insect of tropical origin takes advantage of the ecological opportunities afforded by the modern city. It conjures up dark images, similar to the apartment blocks where it is often found.

As one non-native inhabitant of Rennes said: "cockroaches come from people of dubious hygiene...", "people's filth encourages the presence of cockroaches; some people keep waste in their homes..."

The intentions which we attribute to animals – and to cockroaches in particular – is surprising in more than one respect: "Nothing can stop them; they are very sly, as soon as they see that we've seen them, they disappear..." Moreover, cockroaches hark back to the subterranean city where dark forces dwell; cockroach nests are located under buildings where at one time there were wetlands. Like water, this animal takes advantage of each crack to slide, slither, and penetrate inside people's homes. As another inhabitant of Rennes said, "One person who came to visit me said that it was normal that I had them since my home was on a water source; it's awful..."

To date, this field of research and investigation has not been explored in much detail. ^[20] Further research is necessary, since we know very little about how the environment as a collection of socio-natural problems worthy of public policies reactivates and renews the relationship between inhabitants and their living space, the city, nature and countryside, and with compound categories, such as city and nature, inhabitant and citizen. We are trying to gauge the extent to which the environment plays a role in reshaping the framework of our sensory, imaginative, and emotional experience of the world and the extent to which it affects our understanding of the world, i.e., our frameworks for understanding what is happening. How does the environment bring geography in the broadest sense into play, meaning a new means of conceiving the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the Earth and landforms?

2. Which environment, which aesthetics, and which city?

What do we actually mean by environment? In unison with other researchers concerned with making the environment a social and cultural topic and not solely a technical and scientific one, we can define the environment as the places where we live, work, and play. It is comprised of the ordinary places of everyday existence seen from an angle thus far ignored, i.e., that of the relationships between nature and culture, between what is born and what comes about, and what is produced and thought.^[21] That is the angle of interaction between cultural and symbolic and scientific

and technical materiality.

In the context of my research, environmental aesthetics primarily concerns the city as a constructed space, its changing patterns and extraordinary transformations: its spaces and the ordinary, concrete as well as professional and expert production of the environment. Is the city not the focus of a growing awareness about the fragility of the planet and the price to pay for the loss of its respirable atmosphere as well as the very numerous species that populate the environment? Has the city not become home to a civilization that encourages density, proximity, and traffic, people and goods, in a shared space? Many of the problems that exist can, of course, be understood locally, whether they involve goods, people or even symbolic exchanges, but they can also be understood globally by looking at the links of one local situation with other localities. When urban planners discuss the urban fabric, they now consider different levels of action.

Such ideas underscore the importance of an aesthetic perspective.

Will this perspective help unravel what is at stake in the city as the most common *modus vivendi* and vector for human development? Are urban environment and aesthetic experience not inextricably linked? Cities are beautiful and a showcase for the monumentality of human infrastructure. They are always under construction and inherently embody environmental challenges, and it is important to be democratically aware of such challenges, i.e., in a shared manner. And yet city dwellers have a relationship with the environment which is often more aesthetic than scientific. Finally, building the urban environment requires a shared mastery of the relevant tools and choices.

In sum, adding complexity to analyses and deployment of the urban environment necessarily involves taking account of both ordinary and scientific concerns - and, thus, urban forms - as well as the experience of the city's biological, physical, and chemical materiality which, in addition to appealing to sensations, calls upon representations shaped notably through individual and collective mobilization.

One good example of this is atmospheric pollution. This example has been used numerous times (and has even been the topic of publications).^[22] Our study was based on nearly sixty semi-structured interviews focusing on air pollution practices and representations among the population of Strasbourg. Half of the sample was made up of asthmatics and people allergic to grasses, based on the "case-control" study principle in epidemiological studies. Two interviews with ASPA, the French association for monitoring and studying air quality (known as AASQA in the Alsace region) and a review of news articles in which ASPA was mentioned were also carried out and compared with air quality measurements (both interior and exterior) conducted by doctors and chemists.

The study pointed up three main findings: 1. The people surveyed paid little attention to information on air pollution. They used sensory information (e.g. smell, sight, and noise) to forge an understanding of the phenomenon. 2. The objectified and standard scientific information available on air quality from the ASPA is very different from inhabitants' sensory and empirical knowledge about air pollution, which is bolstered by their attachment to a social and identity-based reality. The contrast between these two realms of knowledge concerning a physical-

chemical phenomenon is quite striking. 3. The practical means of avoiding pollution for city dwellers involves symbolically connecting it to other environmental phenomena. For example, some of the people surveyed believe that green spaces protect them from pollution. Such reasoning is based not on solid scientific knowledge but on a feeling that greenery purifies and that the “garden” image that it conjures up, a heavenly place in many religious cultures, can offer protection from pollution experienced as the product of unnatural human activity. It is thus clear that nature-based cultures, which are based on an aesthetic, proactive view of the environment, play a fundamental role in understanding the environment and in shaping the related practices. Such an observation doesn’t mean we should rely only on everyday experience to understand what is environmentally meaningful. We would hope to generate environmentally significant public action based on hard facts.

Numerous forms of mobilization, however, point to the emergence of new cultures and representations of nature that include the long term, recycling, use, impermanence, etc. These also take into consideration social-biological-physical-chemical interdependences on different scales. This “ecological” aesthetic in its broadest sense encourages people not to overlook the ordinary environment. In order to live, people adopt an everyday aesthetic, which reflects how they understand and fit into their milieu. This everyday aesthetic has several facets: home layout, the position and choice of furniture, how the garden is decorated, interior design, etc.[23] It is important not to forget the importance of people's attachment to their living space reflected in the creation of shared ways of living. With regard to nature, social practices reveal a new awareness of plants as well as animals. An animal that is considered to have intentions expresses a degree of autonomy. The same idea is expressed differently by Olivier Darné, a Parisian artist and beekeeper and member of the Poetic Party: He argues that bees show us the culinary diversity of the city; their pollen gathering is like hunting for a treasure. “Concrete honey” is the result: it is the “Pollination of the city.”

At the heart of the urban bee’s ‘pollen-gathering zones,’ the Poetic Party is creating an interdisciplinary team of artists, botanists, urban planners, anthropologists, walkers, beekeepers, inhabitants and onlookers... to examine the urban and human genre in the space that we all share within the urban agglomeration: “mankind’s beehive.”[24]

How is the meaning that we collectively ascribe to the environment actually constructed? Aesthetic understanding is one element in the construction of a future urban environment on a human scale. Thus, we realize that environmental aesthetics is not solely an artistic matter, although this does constitute one aspect when artistic practices address the environment and encourage us to revisit the “distribution of the sensible.”[25]

Looking at the urban environment also involves studying how its different components refer to different possibilities for action and possible worlds. Derelict land, for example, is synonymous with the uncontrolled proliferation of vegetation in urban space; it is associated with a visual cacophony and unmanaged areas, and it belongs to the category of abandoned or contested social spaces.

Several arguments underscore the importance of environmental aesthetics. Both urban and aesthetic environments are bound up with day-to-day gestures *vis-à-vis* nature. We call this creating a lived environment and its importance in the city is unquestionable: from home to habitat, through different ways of thinking and action. The choice of objects in domestic space and their tasteful placement make up what we may define as a work of ordinary environmental dramatic art. A flower pot does not sit just anywhere, just as windows do not open onto meaningless landscapes. Such a view of aesthetics (in its relationship with the urban environment) should not overshadow the fact that it is a means of describing the ways in which inhabitants contribute to ordinary life. Whether this involves different ways of gardening in the city's shared natural spaces, letting animals proliferate in common spaces or organizing one's home and private space (according to the sun, light, or air, for example), inhabitants, and city dwellers more specifically, forge a relationship with the natural and built environment and construct and showcase an ordinary creativity which, as it exists in public and private space, affects the environment (and could do so even more).

Examples of collective mobilization point up the importance of nature in living arrangements. Inhabitants become spokespeople for nature that is threatened by infrastructure projects and express the desire to protect or, conversely, to develop it. We may then speak of environmental communities associated with their living conditions and prepared to defend such conditions in the heat of the moment. Such concerns are obviously not only about the "local" aspect and local issues; they are also shaped by thoughts about more or less remote nature whose existence is learned about notably via new forms of media.

Such increased awareness of the environment involves professional practices and those who are involved in producing the environment (landscapers, architects, urbanists, as well as planners, artists, etc.). These different professionals design spaces, link up with public institutions, and have their own goals.

For example, Jeroen Van Westen, a Dutch artist, had to redraw a river according to the narratives of inhabitants. He describes his method:

In order to get acquainted with the area I invited Maarten van Wesemael to travel with me around in the area. We made observations, interviewed locals, stakeholders (big farmers, the local tourist board, the museum for peat history) and the commissioners (the Ministry of Agriculture, the Municipality of Emmen, Water Management). It was my first step from a theoretical artistic approach to actually contributing to the transformation of a landscape. It was explicit from the beginning that I would not design a sculpture, but rather the landscape would be the piece of art. A piece of art has an author, a creative power in charge. Since landscape is the expression of the interaction between cultural and natural forces, the author is obviously not an individual but also a combination of both. A metaphor was born that had to be developed further. Could the water that created the swamp not only be the creative force to change the dusty land, but be made visible again as a signature, an

inscription of the landscape of the mutual articulation of nature and culture. If we wanted the signature to tell the history of cohabitation, we would need the inhabitants to tell their part.

These professionals introduce expert knowledge into the production of space, which involves the know-how of builders of the natural environment, and they forge both an aesthetic expertise of shape and the layout of space and the city's forms.

Finally, the environment has to be represented by words, images, and sounds. Different media pay tribute to the environment: news articles, documentaries and blockbuster films all celebrate its beauty or reveal the elements behind a contemporary or future catastrophe (polluted sites, toxic clouds over cities, etc.).

Witnessing such prophetic evidence sometimes bothers people. Ecology is reduced to a spectacular vision. More modestly, the role of artists in the dramatic representation of nature's exploitation is important and helps drive nature conservation policies outside cities. Aside from quenching the thirst for information and constantly enhancing environmental awareness, the internet – the "network of networks" – now helps sound environmental alarm bells and create action communities which gain in importance and visibility through this media (for example, a social movement to protect a species or place threatened by developers). These are collective mobilizations and social movements that provide a public outlet for urban environmental issues.

Ordinary aesthetics and environmental mobilization, regardless of whether they are professional or related to these new media, are key concepts for understanding the urban environment. All are profoundly political and highlight the extent to which the value placed on environmental topics, and the hope that they will outlive us and become part of a sustainable vision, are part of the political process and, in a democratic society, the subject of deliberation and decision-making. Combining the environment and aesthetics is the product of such effort. It is indeed a matter of making sure the environment, all of it and not only nature endangered by human activity, is accessible as an aesthetic object in comparisons of different perspectives that underscore shared values, and the importance of turning it into an object of collective rather than a strictly scientific debate.

A highly critical interpretation of aesthetics is of course possible.

Born in the eighteenth century and bound up with feelings of beauty and the sensations, the most common vision of the discipline is often limited to the idea of decorum and criticised for its participation in the production of all things "spectacular." It is involved in manipulating the masses, helping politicians cheat, and sustaining the silent suffering of those with hard lives.

There are indeed numerous forces that serve to discredit it. Thus, artists who are awarded publicly commissioned contracts, cannot avoid critical language describing their instrumentalization.

They are seen as the tools of an order which completely stifles their freedom and autonomy, mere pawns of the ruling power, creators reduced to the role of artisan or false prophet. As the Greenwashing exhibition showed, the role of ecological artist can indeed be reduced to practically nothing. In an introductory dialogue in the exhibition's catalogue, the curators noted,

The most superficial but environmentally friendly way to organize an exhibition would be to not invite a single artist, to not transport anything, to turn off the lights and heating in the gallery. Like all societies, we have become so accustomed to believing that an ecological gesture involves a sacrifice or abnegation that such literal suggestions now strike us as perfectly sensible.[\[26\]](#)

Although taken out of context, this extract points up the contradiction with which artists, curators, and visitors are confronted. The safest bet would be to send ecology back to the scientific research and public policy spheres, and to get as far away from it as possible in order to escape from the effects of such manipulation.

3. New writing on the environment

There are numerous critical interpretations but they all aim to underscore how the environment is shaped by rules set by an authority. Unlike these critical approaches, we believe in a resolutely pragmatic approach whose goal is a detailed description of the complexity of lived situations and their emergence, as well as the inextricable interweaving that gives them theatrical and dramatic scope. Here the use of aesthetics requires a shift in the way we write about environmental issues in order to place them in a poetic register rather than mathematical problem/solution-type of register. An aesthetics rooted in totalitarianism does exist; can we also speak of democratic aesthetics? If we are to believe John Dewey, the famous American philosopher and pragmatist, the democratization of aesthetic experience[\[27\]](#) involves turning it into an ordinary experience and testing it on a large audience. Such a writing of environmental issues would require a broader understanding of environmental issues.

What type of ecological writing is needed to create a major shift in the natures of culture and cultures of nature? Every solution is a solution to some problem, i.e., the resolution of a coherent series of statements into one or more definite proposals. And yet, a scientific problem-solving approach is, perhaps, not applicable to the extreme complexity and uniqueness of the ecological problems and issues engendered by our society's development from the nineteenth century on. How then can we think about such ecological changes? Environmental aesthetics does not, in this sense, simply involve drawing attention to a set of previously ignored facts. It aims to point up a new means of expressing the ecological drama. For example, the construction of the Alqueva dam in Portugal involved moving the inhabitants of the village of Notre-Dame-de-Luz and the reconstruction of an identical village elsewhere. This was a technical solution to a technical problem.

And yet despite being consulted over a long period, the population of Notre-Dame-de-Luz was tormented by the move.

As Fabienne Wateau has argued, "it was not participation that was at fault, but the poorly adapted or falsely democratic and legitimising ways it was presented."[\[28\]](#) In this case, like in many others, there was an obvious overflow of human drama into the technical handling of a situation. While it may look like the dam issue is technical and involves a confined natural space, a complex ecological and human intermingling is actually at play. It is impossible to technically solve natural problems without also addressing the human environment: e.g. the lives embedded in a

territory, its history, the values it embodies and the populations it houses.

The same is obviously true of urban space: it provides the setting for a dramatic scene *par excellence* and encourages architects and urban planners to arrange senses and bodies in such a way as to create an urban stage. The city's public space, which is aptly described by interactionist ethnologists and often seen as an openly accessible urban space, tends to be the stage for these amazing exchanges of dialogue between the urban masses. It may even have been in urban space that the art of composition in motion which is part of all dance and/or types of drama was noticed for the first time. A work of drama described as the art of exploring a situation through dialogue, as English playwright Edward Bond has noted:

I create situations which start off banal but gradually become extreme in such a way as to force people to explore their own conscience, to use language to define themselves and to define the situation in which they are stuck. This is what leads to changes in language, which increasingly becomes a search tool as the situation gradually evolves. The most useful definition of a dramatic work is: the most extreme form of concentration possible. And the more the characters explore the situation in which they find themselves, the more they understand the position of others. Because the situation is shared by everyone. [29]

Of course the same is true of the languages in the city – and in space in general – which make up the ecological stage play: as Joseph Beuys has argued, [30] language itself is involved in the construction of ecological facts; work on language *per se*, poetry work, enunciation work – and not only criticism which introduces ecological literature into the era of suspicion – is at the heart of eco-poetics. How can this be represented?

For Jonathan Bate, who talks about the ecological work of language in the literary creation process which would complement (or even challenge) scientific and political approaches, [31] and for numerous other ecocritics, it is a matter of endowing natural processes with human language and thus working to re-present them. Literary texts, as such, become a sort of linguistic ecosystem which Bate lyrically describes as follows:

It could be that *poiesis*, in the sense of verse-making is language's most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because *metre* itself – a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat – is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself. [32]

This organic vision of poetry bestows upon it a special connection with the natural world through poetic processes such as metre, rhythm, and the sonority of words imitating sensory images.

Language – and poetic language more specifically – is part of nature's complexity. Working with language is a means of reinventing the interaction between human beings and the environment, and representations of nature.

Part of the environmental aesthetics approach thus involves

working both on forms in the environment and on all forms of representation. It is worth noting that the main argument underpinning this “dramatic” approach is that the complexity and uniqueness of ecological situations, combined with the diversity and disparity of interests, opinions, and outcomes at play, result in competing forms of rationality both for describing the situations in question, assessing them, and attempting to resolve them. The incredible diversity of places which becomes the setting for fairly predictable or totally unexpected ecological problems is a prime example of this.

4. Self-examination and conscience

There are numerous cleavages between the processes at work in the daily occupation of nature and spectacles of nature; between the driving forces of life and “natural commodities,” a fictional misnomer; between self-experience and the concrete reality of nature. What do these cleavages mean and what drives them?

For example, representations of nature and social practices free themselves from the scientific characterisation of phenomena.

Social representations of plant life confer more benefits than scientific knowledge. Urban green corridors point up a large discrepancy between the focus placed on this issue in public policy in France and Europe, which has transformed a planning tool into an ecological solution to numerous problems, and scientific knowledge. Moreover, even if the ordinary experience of places combines practice and representations, language is not always in tune with the actions taken.

Focusing on such actions challenges the role of scientific knowledge in running contemporary societies. The ideas that we come up with collectively have a degree of freedom; scientific knowledge plays a role in shaping these but does not determine them totally. We need to define this freedom and understand how sensory experience works as a register for shared knowledge and as a way of sharing emotional and ethical impressions: “what do I know?” is increasingly synonymous with: “what do I feel?”

We also need to acknowledge the gap between ordinary life governed by the senses and social life determined by images and image politics. We consume images each time we move through space and time: images of the Earth, images of the Amazon and of aboriginals, the irresolute witnesses of the prehistory of our history, images of destroyed places and of conquered lands reserved for tourists, images of cities that have become part of an unprecedented network of territorial marketing.

As such images are produced, we attempt to counter image politics with forms of environmental engagement. We can counter images with descriptions of ambiances, experienced landscapes, and participatory narratives. This is the life of forms.^[33] We therefore aim to describe a “self-experience” and collective experience which cannot be reduced merely to green capitalism; this may become an important lever. Showing what can exist, even if such *modi vivendi* remain marginal, is also a means of pointing up new possibilities. A certain individualism, lack of political confidence, and the worsening ecological crisis have created an ambiguous relationship with the environment: when it is turned into a simple “green” image of places, the environment exists through the strength of the market capitalism that exports it. But let us not forget that it is also a self-experience that sometimes allows a political horizon to be rediscovered.

Through modest attempts to discover or rediscover things that can be done for the environment, we can actually counter the idea of an inevitable disaster or pending catastrophe that obsesses many people today; it is nonetheless incredible that in spite of changing representations and discourse about the environment, in contemporary French society [34] practices have actually changed very little. And yet the goal is to boost nature-based cultures, to promote different visions of the environment and perspectives on earthly elements, as well as other, less depredatory means of appropriation and ownership (cooperative management, pooled asset management, etc.). The goal is no longer to proclaim values or promote large, transcendental horizons, but rather to promote a better everyday life which is more tolerant and respectful than a civilization of "scraps" in which each person scavenges what they can in terms of time and space, in competition with others.

Ethical individualism then begins to mean putting one's knowledge to work in a quest for meaning that will take shape through political resistance, or maybe even forging an ecological alternative. Politics then needs to be reconsidered based on personal involvement. Like Emerson's democratic conception, [35] political resistance truly tests people's self-knowledge. Such political resistance is expressed through direct action which sometimes aims to recast living spaces based on how they are transformed. In such cases, the immediate environment can create new types of action by becoming a sphere for learning and development. However, we must not overlook the fact that the environment is also presented as an equivalent to the material bases of existence, and is therefore opposed to politics based solely on ideas and their application in everyday life or in political life through membership of a political party.

The environment is located at the juncture of theory and ordinary life. We have observed that individuals involved in this type of politics believe that they cannot handle their immediate environment alone in an urban setting without the support of a group. All cases studied in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Russia involved the creation of "environmental communities" defined around an environmental issue. Inhabitants transform their immediate environment through a dynamic process that involves creating a community; such processes are shaped by facing and resolving conflicts, and by successes and failures in ecological innovations, and the sense of feeling involved in one's choices through a shared process.

Between self-recognition and collective processes of aggregation, the types of action which drive such trends need to be analyzed.

What appears particularly important in case studies is the way this self-construction, which is very hypothetical and based on the interplay between concrete action and recognition by others, is part of a sphere of actions which allows it to be precisely defined.

It is not a matter of believing that the success of an initiative depends on its materialization in the eyes of others, but rather of understanding the extent to which the success of both an individual and collective undertaking depends on the actual quality of the process employed. Analyzing such processes also means understanding that the collective process of cleaning up a river, for example, is an uninterrupted sequence of commitments renewed over time which need to be understood as such.

In sum, our analysis of different aesthetic investments in the environment aims to point up two facets of current development: the first involves the use of experience as a sum of past actions that have profoundly transformed individuals and their self-awareness (or their narrative of an event) both on a personal and environmental level; the second involves the transformation of such experiences into a reality that turns capitalism into a driving force for territorialised resources. Both trends are at the root of tensions in the ecological field that tend to make it a topic regulated by a balancing dynamic; either we obey orders calling for action in view of sustainable development and we become virtuous, or we disobey and refuse to be instrumentalized by a cause whose complex realities are difficult to assess: are we not simply dealing with an economy that is seeking to renew its sources of capital ("green economy," "ecological modernization"), or politicians seeking new legitimacy, or even researchers in quest of more authority on the public stage to the detriment of political choices?

We should note that nature understood as both a poison and a cure leads to the creation of policies which are torn between these two dimensions of action from the outset: nature in the city is dirty, but it is also a source of life. Nature policies are focused on health and/or aim to reintroduce a specific kind of nature: e.g. ponds or biodiversity which were actually driven out of urban production in the nineteenth century. That said, studying the creative part of ecological inventions can help our case and point up numerous ambiguities: between scientific knowledge (which involves writing up a problem and its resolution) and common knowledge; between social practices and representations; between the transformation of the material bases of existence (which attempt to analyze naturalists according to scientific knowledge) and common knowledge which can be studied as a resistance to normative orders and the desire for personal development. The decision to favor cross-disciplinarity reflects a desire to understand the complex relationships at play in the contemporary environment. Environmental aesthetics make it possible to study both the processes behind the emergence of self-recognition related to the environmentalization of practices or a deliberate and desired reconnection with nature, and capturing such practices in images via a capitalist system that promotes the globalization of built territorialities and helps reduce them to a series of color images.

5. Conclusion

We went looking for some of the numerous radical alternatives that exist in the environmental field. Despite their frequent discrediting and marginalization, these are collective inventions which may help renew the institutional framework and nurture reality. Such experiences allow new research pointers to emerge which afford us a better understanding of environmental processes.

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Endnotes

[1] In *Writing and Difference*, trans., Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), Jacques Derrida insists on the relationship between a synthetic spatial register which results in a concentration of time, and the register of narrative which refers to the present and to memory. The first register is similar to planning and is represented by plans and diagrams. The second uses narration, encounters and the endlessly deferred production of definitive meaning. The narrative ultimately works like a tense that seeks to express itself using the future tense.

[2] Nathalie Blanc, *Les animaux et la ville* (Paris: O. Jacob, 2000).

[3] Nathalie Blanc, *Vers une esthétique environnementale* (Versailles: Quae, 2008). *Nouvelles esthétiques urbaines* (Paris: éditions Armand Colin, 2012).

[4] See "L'investissement habitant des lieux et milieux de vie: une condition du renouvellement urbain? Etude prospective en France, États-Unis, Pays-Bas, Allemagne, Russie. Réponse à l'appel à propositions de recherche 'programme exploratoire de recherche prospective européenne,'" PUCA, 2008.

[5] Since 2008, I have jointly coordinated a programme that focuses on urban green corridors and the creation of frames of reference ("*Evaluation des trames vertes urbaines et élaboration de référentiels: une infrastructure entre esthétique et écologie pour une nouvelle urbanité en réponse au volet 3: 'Environnement et risques' de l'appel à projet ANR 2008, Ville durable*").

[6] Philosopher Emily Brady (*Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003,)) argues that this new trend acknowledges that natural environments are not only experienced as landscapes, but also as environments in which the aesthetic subject appreciates nature as dynamic, changing, and evolving. This is an aesthetic approach which, depending on its different forms, draws on ecological knowledge, imagination, emotion, and a fresh understanding of nature as embodying its own narrative.

[7] Joan Iverson Nassauer, "Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics and Ecology," in *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology*, edited by J. I. Nassauer (Washington DC: Island Press, 1997).

[8] Catherine Chomarat-Ruiz, "Une science du paysage favoriserait-elle la rencontre entre artistes et politiques?," *Actes du colloque 'Paysage et politique, le regard de l'artiste'* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

[9] Nathalie Blanc, *Vers une esthétique environnementale* (Versailles: Editions Quae, Collection Indisciplines, 2007). *Nouvelles esthétiques urbaines* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

[10] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[11] Allen Carlson, *Nature and Landscape, An introduction to Environmental Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[12] Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). *Sensibility and Sense, The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010).

[13] Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

[14] Yrjö Sepänmaa, *The Beauty of Environment, A General Model for Environmental Aesthetics* (Denton: Environmental Ethics Books, 1993). "Applied Aesthetics, in Art and beyond," in *Finnish Approaches to Aesthetics*, edited by Ossi Naukkarinen and Olli Immonen (Jyväskylä: International Institute of Applied Aesthetics and the Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 1995).

[15] Elisabeth Schellekens, *Aesthetics and Morality* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007).

[16] Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004). *Le partage du sensible, esthétique et politique* (Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2000).

[17] Alfred Gell, *Art and agency. An anthropological theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

[18] There are only three species in France: *Blatta orientalis* L., *Blattella germanica* (L.) and *Supella longipalpa* (F.) which are unique in their development cycles, biology and ecology. Our research focused only on *Blattella germanica*, which is a small (12-15mm at the adult stage), light brown species with two longitudinal black stripes. This species is, by far, the most common.

[19] Nathalie Blanc, "Cockroaches, or Worlds as Images", *Contemporary Aesthetics*, volume 5, (2007).
<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/journal.php>.

[20] Mark Whitehead, "The wood for the trees: ordinary environmental injustice and the everyday right to urban nature," *International Journal Of Urban And Regional Research*, 33, 3 (2009), 662-681.

[21] Michel De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien: arts de faire* (Paris: Folio essais, 1990). Girard Luce, Mayol Pierre, *L'invention du quotidien: habiter, cuisiner* (Paris: Folio essais, 1994).

[22] Nathalie Blanc, Carole Waldwogel, Sandrine Glatron, "Le développement urbain durable au prisme des politiques urbaines de prévention de la pollution atmosphérique: quelle place pour le citoyen aujourd'hui?," in: Pinson G., Béal V., Gauthier M., *Le développement durable changera-t-il la ville? Le regard des sciences sociales* (Saint-Etienne: Presses universitaires de Saint-Etienne, collection Dynamiques Métropolitaines, 2011), p. 299-315.

[23] Françoise Paul-Levy, Marion Segaud, *Anthropologie de l'espace* (Paris: Alors, CCI, centre Pompidou, 1983).

[24] <http://www.parti-poetique.org/>, visited on 20 August 2010, translated here.

[25] Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris: Fabrique, 2000).

[26] Ilaria Bonacossa, Latitudes (dir.), *Greenwashing Environment: Perils, Promises and Perplexities*, (Turin, Fondazione Sandretto/The Bookmakers, 2008), p. 26.

[27] John Dewey, *L'art comme expérience* (Pau: Publications de l'université de Pau / Farrago, 2005).

[28] Nathalie Blanc, Sophie Bonin, (Eds.), *Grands barrages et habitants* (Paris: Editions QUAÉ, coll. Natures sociales, 2008).

[29] Edward Bond « L'imagination, entre le gouffre et le salut », propos recueillis par Mona Chollet et Luz, version longue d'un entretien paru dans Charlie Hebdo du 31 mai 2000, <http://www.peripheries.net/article189.html> consulté le 20/07/2010.

[30] Joseph Beuys, *Par la présente, je n'appartiens plus à l'art* (Paris: L'Arche, 1988).

[31] Jonathan Bate, *The song of the Earth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) p. 200.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[33] Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and reality* (New-York: The Free Press, 1978).

[34] Paul Bréchon, Olivier Galland, *L'individualisation des valeurs* (Paris: Armand Colin, Collection Sociétales, 2010).

[35] Sandra Laugier, *Une autre pensée politique américaine: La démocratie radicale d'Emerson à Stanley Cavell* (Paris: Michel Houdiard ed. coll. Horizons américains, 2004).