

Aesthetics as ecology, or the question of the form of eco art

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Abstract

Eco art poses a problem to classification because its two terms have such broad meaning: after conceptual art, there are no restrictions on the material form art can take, and ecology covers notions of environment, nature, interactions with nature, interconnection, and a fundamental, ontological condition of belonging. I consider recent attempts to classify the field, and suggest that, while they can be helpful, the full force of the problem of categorisation is better addressed by turning to the position given to aesthetics by phenomenology. This takes the problem of categorisation down to the level of how categories can be applied to experience when conventional, subject–object frameworks have been suspended. Our status as Da-seins, beings whose nature is always, already constructed by the environment around us, I argue, makes prominent the role of the senses, indexicality and metaphor in the organization of experience, and provides a way of understanding aesthetics as ecology (in the broadest sense of the word).

Keywords: aesthetics, Da-sein, eco art, ecology, existential, index, phenomenology.

Biographical statement

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Although the origins of ecological art or eco art (I shall use the latter name from hereon) are relatively easy to identify, the full meaning and scope of the name are not so easy to determine. The emergence of eco art as a visual art form is arguably the result of a number of interrelated factors in the 1960s: American and United Kingdom countercultures, including disillusionment with government and material wealth; conceptual art's reaction against traditional aesthetic values, especially the artwork as a commodity; and the development of ecology as an empirical science, including a growing number of theoretical terms, such as 'ecosystem' and 'biosphere', that lent themselves to counterculture philosophy, and the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, a scientific study of the detrimental effects of pesticides on the environment, especially birds. More recently, fears regarding pollution, climate change, and environmental damage caused by the extraction of natural resources have made eco art more prominent as a form of critical response.

However, while it is possible to describe succinctly the conditions that gave rise to eco art, the forms that it has taken are manifold and pose a challenge to classification. Western visual art has always addressed the natural world, either as a portrayal of the kingdom of God, an exercise in representation or as the depiction of beauty in nature. The name 'fine art' was given to art that imitates the beautiful in nature by Charles Batteux in 1746, and the power to create beauty by *abstracting from* or *going beyond* nature became an expression of the genius or autonomy of art in nineteenth-century romanticism.¹ But the combination of conceptual art and ecology's interest in the interconnections between organism and environment makes for a very different proposition. An art practice that is critical of traditional aesthetics and art-making practices, and open to adopting modes of expression and display from all forms of discourse, approaches nature *not to represent it* but *to work with it*. In sympathy with this openness, the natural world, once seen through the lens of ecology, stops being a static

object of disinterested appreciation and becomes a set of dynamic interconnections of which one is a part and which is open to cooperation. The potential for novel, critical and political expression and intervention is therefore immense.

In this chapter, I argue that ‘art’ and ‘ecology’ are terms with broad meanings which, when combined in the concept of ‘eco art’, create an overwhelming array of possibilities, and make the problem of categorisation fundamental to eco art. I consider recent attempts to classify the field, and suggest that, while they can be helpful, the full force of the problem of categorisation is better addressed by turning to the position given to aesthetics by phenomenology. This takes the problem of categorisation down to the level of how categories can be applied to experience when conventional, subject–object frameworks have been suspended. Drawing on phenomenology, I argue that our status as *Da-seins*, beings whose nature is always, already constructed by the environment around us, makes prominent the role of the senses, indexicality and metaphor in the organisation of experience, and provides a way of understanding aesthetics as ecology (in the broadest sense of the word).

Recent attempts to classify eco art

Linda Weintraub, in her 2012 survey of eco art, acknowledges the variety of forms it takes and attempts to categorise them, not in the interests of identifying the essence of eco art but in order to display the vibrancy of the genre and ‘[to] facilitate compare-and-contrast analysis’ (Weintraub 2012: xv). She suggests four ‘banner’ headings that are either addressed or adopted by eco artists – ‘art genres’, ‘art strategies’, ‘eco issues’, and ‘eco approaches’ – and which in turn subdivide into the following categories:

art genres	art strategies	eco issues	eco approaches
paint/print	instruct	energy	conservation
sculpture	intervene	waste	preservation
performance	visualize	climate change	social ecology
photo/video	metaphorize	technology	deep ecology

bio art	activate	habitat	restoration ecology
generative art	celebrate	sustainability	urban ecology
social practice	perturb	resources	industrial ecology
digital art	dramatize	chaos/complexity	human ecology
installation	satirize	systems	ecosystem ecology
public art	investigate	reforms	sustainable development
design			

(Weintraub 2012: xvlii-xv)

The above is not a table but a matrix. It is not the case that each row represents a particular strand of eco art, i.e. Weintraub is not suggesting that sculpture intervenes in matters of waste with a view to promoting preservation. Rather, as a matrix, it enables her to show how a number of eco artworks address a range of issues through selected artistic strategies and, in so doing, adopt one or more eco approaches. Each of the forty-seven artworks that she discusses is prefaced by a ‘schematic’ diagram with lines linking all the categories that she thinks are demonstrated by the work. For example, *Greenwich Village Time Landscape* (1978-ongoing), the former 45 foot x 200 foot litter-strewn lot in downtown New York City transformed into a stretch of woodland made up of indigenous trees, flowers and grasses by Alan Sonfist, is schematised as: the art genres ‘bio art’, ‘generative art’ and ‘public art’; the art strategies ‘instruct’, ‘intervene’ and ‘celebrate’; the eco issues ‘habitat’, ‘chaos/complexity’, ‘systems’ and ‘reforms’; and the eco approaches ‘preservation’, ‘urban ecology’ and ‘ecosystem ecology’ (Weintraub 2012: 111).

Other recent surveys of eco art offer different, less detailed categorisations. In *Art and Ecology Now*, Andrew Brown divides the terrain into works that: (1) visualise or call attention to ecological concerns; (2) develop through a cooperative relationship with an environment or use it as source material; (3) emerge as a result of research into physical or environmental processes; (4) critique humanity’s manipulation of the planet’s resources; (5) offer solutions to environmental problems; and (6) change or transform environments through ‘radical interventions that have a direct impact on local and global ecosystems’ (Brown 2014: 218). Although he is not explicit about them as

groupings, the chapter titles used by Malcolm Miles in his *Eco-Aesthetics: Art, Literature and Architecture in a Period of Climate Change* effectively indicate the five areas where he thinks eco-aesthetics creates new meaning and sensibilities: (1) ‘ruins and catastrophes’; (2) ‘regressions and reclamations’; (3) ‘representations’; (4) ‘interruptions’; and (5) ‘cultures and climate change’ (Miles 2014). ‘Representations’ is possibly the one area that is additional to Weintraub’s and Brown’s taxonomies in Miles’s account. It is the acknowledgment that aesthetic practices can complicate the representation of nature, for example, the out-of-context use of the Fibonacci pattern found in sunflower seed-heads by Peter Randall-Page’s almost three metres high, granite sculpture *Seed* (2007) (Miles 2014: 124). On a more critical note, Timothy Morton asserts that art focused on ideas connected with the environment has nothing to offer ecology, and ‘will cease to exist at some point in the history of ecological thought’. Eco art, he adds, is ‘an art of “whateverness”’ and aesthetics ‘is full of emptiness – gaps and openness – rather than being a solid, plastic thing’ (Morton 2010: 104–5). This is part of his project to make ecology a matter not of nature but of having connection and coexistence as the basis of thinking (Morton 2007, 2010). To be ecological as an expression of coexistence, Morton suggests, eco art should emphasise: (1) ‘automated processes such as evolution’; (2) consciousness of our condition as interconnected beings; and (3) the ‘ruthlessness’ with which mathematics and science model nature as a resource (Morton 2010: 105).

In the categories of eco art offered by Weintraub, Brown, Miles and Morton, there are many overlaps, but also some differences, especially (and unsurprisingly) as a result of Morton’s reorientation of ecology. It might seem ironic that art’s engagement with ecology, an approach to the world that focuses on relationship, should require such efforts of classification, especially if one associates classification with the isolation of objects in containers or the bringing of particulars under a universal. But none of the authors is presenting their accounts as a definitive set of essential categories. Rather, they are simply providing critical studies that offer pathways through and comparisons across what might otherwise be a diffuse and diverse terrain. So what’s the problem?

According to Garrard, the challenge for ecocriticism is ‘to keep one eye on the ways in which “nature” is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact

that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse' (Garrard 2012: 10). The rub here, between one eye and the other, is the question of how we apply categories to reality, for even though reality exists independently of us, the way in which we categorise it affects the way in which we interact with it and, in turn, the forms and appearances that it presents to us in response. Ecocriticism is therefore an attentiveness to the power of categories to shape and form what is real, and a calling attention to the responsibility that comes with that power. In terms of the challenge posed to classification by eco art, this is not just a question of finding categories with which to cut up the cake of eco art, but rather a matter of recognising how art and ecology intersect as domains whose scope is entirely open, and the scope for possibility that this creates. Instead of picturing them as domains, which implies a region that is circumscribed or defined, it might be better to think of them as horizons of possibility: conceptual art as a form that rejects art historical genres and seeks to appropriate other, non-artistic objects and discourses, and an ecological perspective that views the world not as an object to be depicted but as a set of relations to be worked with. It is not that I think that the categories offered by Weintraub et al. are inadequate to the task of defining the various aspects eco art can present. My point is that when one considers the possibilities that are open within conceptual art, and the possibilities that are available through exercising nature's joints, and that the two sets of possibilities will multiply, then eco art *as the intersection where the multiplication occurs* becomes the state of constantly having to look to the categories one is reaching for, to check the categories that are introduced whenever a medium, technology or physical process is adopted, and to assess what categories might be brought to the work through audience perception and interpretation. This might imply a state of always being on one's guard with regard to how one thinks, acts, or judges, and how others do the same, but it seems to me that this is the kind of attentiveness implied by Garrard's description of the challenge of ecocriticism. What I am arguing here, and adding to the list of qualities identified by Weintraub, Brown, Miles and Morton, is that eco art has the requirement of attentiveness to categorisation at its core.

The meaning of 'ecology'

The first step towards glimpsing the possibilities that occur at the intersection between art and ecology is to clarify the meaning of ‘ecology’. In one sense, it is the name of the scientific study of the relationship between organisms and the environment in which they are set, as coined by Ernst Haeckel in his 1866 book, *General Morphology of Organisms* (Haeckel 1866). (Ideas of interconnections between organisms and their environment predate this, for example, observations from Charles Darwin and Karl Möbius (to name but two) in the nineteenth century, and ultimately from the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (372–287BC), a contemporary of Aristotle.)³ However, the idea of interconnections between organism and environment can have the effect of turning ‘ecology’ into the care and consideration of organism and environment as things that are perceived to occur ‘out there’, in ‘Nature with a capital N’. The danger is that the focus is on environment (with networks of organisms) *as something that surrounds us* and which is therefore in some sense distinct from us, when it is arguably *the nature of relationship per se*, including the relationships formed by the way humans think about the world, that is equally deserving of attention. This is emphasised by Keller and Golley who define ecology as the thesis that ‘the essence or identity of a living thing is an expression of connections and context’ (Keller and Golley 2000: 2). As indicated above, the concept of ‘Nature with a capital N’ is challenged by Morton. Ecological thinking, he writes, ‘has set up “Nature” as a reified thing in the distance, under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener, preferably in the mountains, in the wild’, when it should be a way of thinking in which every thought has coexistence and interconnection as its foundation (Morton 2010: 8).

The idea that ecology might be interpreted not so much as a study of relationships in nature but as a theory of thinking or of being finds some support in the original meaning of the word. It is derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning ‘house’, ‘dwelling place’, ‘a place where I feel at home’, ‘a place where I belong’ (Keller and Golley 2000: 7–8). On this basis, ‘ecology’ might be translated as the logic of belonging. One example of a philosophy that makes belonging a theory of being is Heidegger’s phenomenology, in which human being is defined as a *Da-sein*, a ‘being-*there*’, with the crucial message being that any reference to a human being has to include the environment, the there-

ness, of which they are a part (Heidegger 1996).⁴ The philosophical impact of human being conceived as a Da-sein is that it opposes the Cartesian tradition of referring to the human being as a self-contained subject set against the world as a series of objects, and affirms that any identification of so-called human action has to acknowledge its embeddedness in and indebtedness to the conditions that surround and enable it. This might sound close to deep ecology, the thesis, introduced by Arne Naess, that mainstream ecology is anthropocentric, preoccupied with projects that are tied to human welfare or concepts of nature, e.g. preserving biodiversity and conserving wilderness, and therefore ‘shallow’ (Naess 1973). This is Morton’s criticism also. He in fact acknowledges that he is joining this critical heritage, and at one point considers his approach to be ‘*really* deep ecology’ (Morton 2007: 197-205, emphasis added). One deep ecological response has been to draw upon Heidegger’s immersion of the human subject in the world as a way of ensuring that humanity is not privileged. However, I would want to argue that Heidegger’s relevance for ecology goes beyond dispersing the human subject within nature or the world. This, after all, still hangs onto the concept of nature or world as an outside. Rather, the full force of what I am calling his logic of belonging can be found in the implications which Da-sein has for the way experience and the senses are understood, and specifically the way in which they might occur as forms of care (*Sorge*).⁵ Experience – not just human, although admittedly this is Heidegger’s focus – is shown to occur not as the *having* of impressions (the dominant view supported by empiricism and capitalism) but as an opening onto a range of possibilities made available by a set of prior conditions, e.g. a certain conceptual framework, a certain kind of body or apparatus in a certain setting, in such a way that attribution to a subject and to an object is impossible. This is a form of care in the sense that what is experienced does not simply occur as an object that I can throw away or walk away from, but as an abiding part of the network of interests and concerns that defines ‘my’ being in the world (with ‘my’ in inverted commas to highlight the way in which subject–object language succeeds in reasserting itself).

The concept of ‘belonging’ is active in two senses here: it affirms that I as a Da-sein belong to the world in such a way that attribution of what belongs to the world and what belongs to me cannot be made. In the first sense, it is the assertion of an ontology,

an expression of the fundamental nature of being as a state of immersion and entanglement that resists acts of separation and isolation. In the second, it is a component in an already-established object-centred ontology, assisting in acts of apportioning properties to one object or another. Heidegger's philosophy promotes the former, and seeks to question the latter. Although this might sound as if it makes descriptions of experience more problematic than familiar, straightforward, subject–predicate statements allow, it is just the kind of disruption to thought and language that is needed if ecology is not merely to be filed under 'environmentalism', and if ecocriticism is to call attention to the responsibility that we have for organising, categorising and, ultimately, perceiving 'nature' or reality the way we do. It turns ecology into a form of ontology, a way of thinking about the structures and divisions that organise reality and, as such, narrows the gap between ecology and ecocriticism. Although my position draws upon Heidegger, I shall not offer any detailed exposition of his phenomenology in this chapter. However, I do give an account below of how his thinking bears upon the nature of expression in eco art.

Ecology then has a range of meanings: environment, relationships between organism and environment, thinking, and being as interconnection, coexistence and belonging. If we expected a study of the possibilities between art and ecology to be simply a matter of considering those between art and environment, then we were wrong: the study has suddenly become a lot broader and a lot more complex. One point has been clarified though. There can sometimes be uncertainty over the divisions or overlaps between eco art, environmental art and land art. What distinguishes one from the other, if anything? While the latter two declare a focus on the territory or conditions addressed by the art or in which the art is set, the range of meanings of 'ecology' confirms that eco art has a much wider, more uncertain and almost bewildering range of possibilities. The bewilderment is on two accounts: (1) art can be anything, and (2) in its engagement with ecology, it can potentially open onto anything from a relationship with an environment or a state of interconnection to a state of being situated in the world or a question of the conditions which enable the perception of reality. It has to be asked where this leaves us with the challenge of ecocriticism I took from Garrard as a preface the question about art and ecology, namely: the challenge 'to keep one eye on the ways in which "nature" is

always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse' (Garrard 2012: 10). Am I now suggesting that ecocriticism has to keep additional eyes on ecology as concepts of relationship, thinking, belonging, etc.? No, my expanded list of definitions does not mean that Garrard's challenge is too narrow and that more ecocritical eyes are needed, for there is a lot of Heidegger in his formulation of the challenge. Although he refers to 'nature' (admittedly in inverted commas), the emphasis he places on attentiveness to its construction and its independent existence is a fair summary of the situation we are in according to phenomenology as regards the responsibility we have for how the world makes itself manifest.

The suggestion that the relationship between art and ecology leads to a bewildering array of possibilities is understandable, and some might find it reasonable, but it is arguably unhelpful in that bewilderment does not indicate a line through the confusion to a conclusion or a position on the nature and scope of eco art. Of course, this could be the conclusion: both concepts possess an openness or a flexibility to the degree that, when combined, no single, clear position on the nature and scope of eco art is possible. I stated above that eco art has at its core the need to consider how categories are applied to it, and the survey of the broader meanings of ecology mean this need is now even greater, to the extent that eco art faces an existential crisis: it is without any essence or nature that it can turn to for guidance on how it might proceed. Any attempt to offer a taxonomy of the subject is in danger of giving the impression that field has been scoped and classified, and needs to assert that the categories offered are provisional and intended to aid study through comparison and contrast, which is what Weintraub does in fact (Weintraub 2012: xv).⁶ We also cannot turn to art as the source of any nature that might offer some determination. After conceptual art, the contemporary artist cannot rely upon the traditional decisions made by the histories of medium, form, and style to determine the content and development of their work. Instead, any *aspect of or object from or attitude towards* life, including material or virtual possibilities, interactive technologies, and historical, theoretical and social contexts, is open to the artist.

An aesthetic response to an existential question

But I think the hollowing out of meaning is a constructive outcome. It demonstrates that the choices we *make*, whichever words, materials, technologies or contexts that we *reach for*, will be significant in that they introduce a set of concerns for exploration. The value structures that govern the definition of art and the portions of nature that warrant ecological attention have been overturned. What could be a greater indication of the potential of eco art than the realisation that any item in the world, no matter how seemingly insignificant, can be the ground for artistic, ecological enquiry? While this presents existential crisis as a positive philosophical development, it still leaves us in the dark as to how an eco art project might proceed. The existentialist answer is to recognise that Da-sein is a being-*there*, a being surrounded by conditions that are always, already active and underway. The problem is *not mine alone*, where ‘*mine*’ is taken to refer to what belongs to an isolated, disembodied Cartesian mind looking for the way out of a philosophical minefield. Instead, as a Da-sein, a being who is in part constituted by the materials, technologies, and communities that surround me, directions will be proposed by possibilities *that occur to me*, not in a casual, momentary, thought-bubble way, but in the sense that thoughts, observations and *concerns* impress themselves upon me. ‘Concerns’ is italicised because it is one of the alternative translations of *Sorge*, care, in Heidegger’s philosophy. It is not meant in the sense of a set of problems, although this is not excluded, but in the sense that my being is a state of active engagement with my surroundings and what the surroundings make possible. It is not that there is a first a self who then looks for objects to interact with. Rather, my being as a Da-sein is the condition of being caught up in the materials, technologies, and communities that surround me, e.g. a body, the senses, contact with other beings and objects, structures that provide warmth and shelter, etc. The point is implicit in the wording of the first sentence in this paragraph: ‘the choices we *make*, whichever words, materials, technologies or contexts that we *reach for*, will be significant in that they introduce a set of concerns for exploration’. ‘Make’ and ‘reach for’ affirm that, in choosing a course of action, our action can only happen because words, materials, technologies, etc., surround us and sustain us, and are there to enable and articulate the action.

This is where the concept of the aesthetic is crucial. The materials, technologies, and communities that surround me, are aesthetic, not in the eighteenth-century sense of beauty but in the original, ancient sense of what is made manifest through the senses, the body and technology; every thing has to appear, to adopt a form. This ancient meaning has been reclaimed by phenomenology as part of its project of challenging the modern subject–object divide. It is all too easy to resort to conceptualising the senses as channels with a receiving consciousness at the end of them, but with the subject–object divide put in question, phenomenology seeks to characterise them in terms more fundamental and ontological than mere reception. From a Heideggerian perspective, the surface of the desk at which I am sat, as I perceive it, is not mine, is not a sensation or an experience that I possess, but a care or concern in as much as it forms part of the layout of the environment in which I am situated and in which action is immediately possible. It might be useful to talk in terms of an aesthetics of care. I am not thinking of the aesthetic properties that might accompany what we ordinarily understand by care, e.g. looking after one’s family, neighbours, friends, possessions, but instead the idea that those parts of life that are open, meaningful and important to us are also those that we see in detail, that take on many diverse forms, that are manifest in a variety of ways. When we look closely, what might first to appear to be one thing goes on to become two, four, etc.

Given the possibilities that are open between art and ecology, I am suggesting that our condition as Da-seins, beings who are situated, for whom the world is made manifest in the form of cares or concerns, offers an answer to the question of how we might understand the nature and scope of eco art. If I am an artist, I will want to make *something*, and that thing won’t be an object or event that comes out of nowhere or ends up residing in a vacuum, but will be nestled within a network of interests and concerns, including contender materials and technologies, and the discourses which surround them. In choosing an area for attention, all these elements have the potential to be opened up and transformed in ways that turn what originally seemed remote or beyond care into something surprising, that takes on a new appearance, with the capacity to become a care or a concern for the viewer. This happens as an extension of the aesthetics that I have already described, i.e. what is made manifest through the

senses, the body and technology. It is a process I think of as ‘interested signification’: ‘interested’ because an interest or concern is present, and becomes a cognitive filter that informs interpretation of an artwork, and ‘signification’ because all objects and appearances have the capacity to signify and evoke, more often than not in terms that go beyond an initial or familiar understanding. Three ideas from the history of aesthetics are active here: (1) *the particularising effect of the senses*: when looked at closely, in detail, all concepts and subjects have particular sensory forms that go beyond any customary, general or remote understanding of them; a concept is something which is applied, and when pictured or turned over in one’s mind prior to application, will invariably involve a colour or sound or shape or situation; (2) all objects, materials and technologies have what Peirce terms ‘*indexicality*’:⁷ the capacity to leave impacts and traces in ways that are surprising as a result of the causal interaction they have with one another, meaning they can present appearances that prompt them to be seen and possibly cared for in a new light; and (3) *metaphor*: the interaction between the concepts, the sensory forms (1), and the indexical expression (2), creates the opportunity for metaphor, in which each side is revived by the other, offering more ways in which what was originally overlooked or perceived as remote becomes surprising.⁸ If eco art can draw upon an infinite range of possibilities, then its ecological or political or philosophical value as art is that it seeks to create openings, alignments, intersections, redirections, etc., that allow what are customarily regarded as ‘take them or leave them’ objects, i.e. they are ultimately *disregarded*, instead to be cared for, to become *concerns* within the Da-sein of the viewer in the phenomenological sense, i.e. prospects wherein the viewer sees qualities they hadn’t recognised before, and becomes inclined to consider them further. The movement from ‘object’ to ‘care’ is ecological in the phenomenological sense, for it encourages an understanding of perception that departs from the subject–object model. It could also be considered ecological in the ‘environmental’ sense, because it is arguably perception of the world in terms of objects that are not mine, that are expendable, whose fate is of no concern, that plays a major part in environmental destruction and neglect.

Example 1: melting glaciers

Let us look at two examples of interested signification. Two will be helpful, I think: one to indicate how my aesthetics of ecology can critique and present alternative possibilities in response to a work that is already considered eco art; the other to show how an artist might start given the infinity of possibilities available. An advantage of the first example is that the presence of a familiar environmental cause allows me to show how my aesthetics of ecology presents an expanded notion of the form that eco art can take. It also allows the technical terms in my aesthetics of ecology to be exercised in a context where questions of the scope of art and environmental concerns are already underway.

If one wanted to make work in response to melting glaciers, where or how would one position oneself? Does one offer a recognisable representation of a glacier or show physical properties at work through the causal, indexical trace marks that they might leave? Which technologies and which modes of presentation would one use? In **Katie Paterson's** installation *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* from 2007-8, a recording of the sound of a melting glacier is made available to people if they phone a number that is presented in white neon on a gallery wall (see figs. 1 and 2). An excerpt from the recording can be heard via Paterson's website (Paterson 2008). Although we have a general sense of what 'melting ice' signifies, when it is experienced directly, in the particular, it turns out it does not have a single, fixed identity. Rather, the appearances it presents *depends upon the interested signification through which it is encountered*. The melting ice first becomes a series of particular creaking, cracking, trickling sounds that are audible at the end of a phone. This is the first, sensory aspect of interested signification. It is debatable whether a second, indexical aspect is present. An indexical sign, according to Peirce's definition, functions not through resemblance (e.g. a portrait) or convention (e.g. 'red' to signify 'stop') but through causal connection, e.g. smoke indicating fire. Arguably the sound of a melting iceberg is indexical in that the sound does not *resemble* the ice. The resemblance-index distinction is tied strongly to visual signification. The fact that the sound recording heard through the phone approximates to the sound as heard directly suggests that manipulating the power of ice or sound to have a causal impact elsewhere was not one of Paterson's intentions. But the strength of the work lies in the metaphor it creates between melting ice and a phone call, the third aspect of interested

signification. As a sound, melting ice goes beyond any general sense of what we think melting ice is, and draws upon qualities in the sound (creaks, cracks, roars, trickles, and other effects that are not so easily described) and the setting in which the sound is performed, in this case, at the end of a phone, a situation in which one is accustomed to talking to a friend, a lover or a colleague. The iceberg-as-sound is now heard through the intimacy and other emotions that surround human contact.

What other forms might a melting iceberg adopt as eco art? One of the arenas of possibility opened by conceptual art is the range of forms art can take and contexts in which it can sit once traditional genres have been rejected, with the suggestion that the work has a heightened autonomous, critical effect by employing forms or occurring in situations not normally associated with art. Criticality comes from the use of unfamiliar forms or situations, the argument has it, on the understanding that they are deployed in ways that put them in a new light or show them to have new effects. While having the sound of a melting glacier at the end of a phone line employs familiar sound recording technologies, i.e. causal interactions that have been established through decades of development in sound recording, a near-infinite fund of possibility remains to be explored in the causal, indexical potential of melting ice. The importance of indexical expression for my aesthetics is that it acknowledges the capacity of one object to act and leave a mark upon another independently of human interests in signification through resemblance and convention. It is recognition of the fact that objects have agency independently of human action. It is primarily discussed in aesthetics in relation to the notion of indexical drawing,⁹ and is an area that is ripe for examination in terms of Latour's actor-network theory (Latour 1993, 1999) and Harman's object-oriented ontology (Harman 2005). As Harman demonstrates, metaphor is vital to appreciating the agency of objects (in addition to its role as the third aspect of interested signification), because it provides a mechanism for understanding how the properties of one object can interact with the properties of another to create something that neither object in isolation could anticipate (Harman 2005: 101–24; 141–4). In terms of the value to the ecological aesthetics I am presenting, it results in the production of forms that cannot easily be categorised, at least not in the terms of the two starting objects, and

which therefore acquire an allure that makes them and possibly their starting objects new concerns for the viewer.

A work that considers the indexical potential of melting icebergs would look to the kind of setting that allows the meltwater to exert its own agency. One possibility might be the installation of monolithic blocks of ice in a series of commercial or institutional spaces, possibly selected on the basis of their carbon footprint, which are then simply allowed to melt and damage surfaces, furnishings and equipment. The meltwater would disable electronic devices, carry particles of materials it finds on its course, and leave traces of them on any trace-bearing surface, e.g. walls and carpets. The damaged items would not just be left under the heading 'damaged items' but would be documented or explored by artists in ways that pursue alternative, possible indexical or metaphorical possibilities within the objects, and allow them to present appearances that go beyond 'throw away' categories of, for example, 'stained wall', 'sodden carpet', 'short-circuited computer'. The specks, swirls, stains and ripples of colour that might be brought to what was formerly a white wall are ripe for being described in metaphorical terms of, for example, movement, weight, tension, bodies. Drips of water landing on exposed concrete from a sodden carpet that is suspended in mid-air become very evocative. Are they footsteps? Are they distillations of former footsteps? Do the shifts in tone as the carpet changes from damp to dry make it appear map-like or sky-like? The documentation, in the form of photographs, records, installations, or other forms suggested by the damage, would be displayed in the effected space prior to or as part of the refurbishment process. Thought would be given as to whether the water used is actually from a melted iceberg or whether local tap water would do. Small-scale test-melts would be done to establish whether the different waters leave different traces, and how these differences affected interpretation. Funding would be secured to cover the cost of damage, lost productivity and health and safety administration.

It is more than likely that this will be interpreted as an act of destruction executed solely in the interests of disrupting the activities of companies or institutions, resulting in damaged furnishings and equipment, and photographs and records of the damage. However, it is more than this, and the case for the ecological value of the work would

be made in approaches to funding bodies and contender host organisations. It is a staged manifestation of the capacity of water to occupy places that most people do not want it to occupy, and to have effects in ways in which most people don't want it to have effects. The damage will obstruct the routine operation of the host organisation, not necessarily as an act of aggression but as an opportunity for staff and audience members to witness the capacity of objects to have a life or adopt a form that is other than the one into which it has been directed by design and manufacture. The effect on the working space with the water in it, and afterwards when artists are exploring the sensory, indexical and metaphorical properties of the damaged objects, would turn the working space into an art venue that not only offers an environmental message (climate change) but also demonstrates the ecological–phenomenological thesis that human being is located within a physical, technological environment that has an agency of its own. It is possible that the project would not get approval beyond a series of controlled, small-scale test-melts, and would instead become the cause of a long series of correspondence in which proposals to stage the project in the offices of selected companies are made, defended, rejected, amended, reconsidered, etc. Even then, the value of the preparation and administration should not be looked. Every email and every form has an aesthetic. Such documents include categories that indicate what takes priority, and phrases that have been informed to express an institution's position on a proposal. These too can be regarded as particular, indexical expressions of the power of water.

Example 2: if I am an artist, I will want to make something

For the second example, let us consider how an artist might start given the infinity of possibilities available. It will not have the same *particular* character of the first example, as the predicament in which I am placing artists and ecocritics is one where the nature and scope of eco art has been hollowed out, made entirely open, turned into an existential question. It is the path that is taken to choosing, forming and classifying the particular that is important, on my approach. I have suggested that, given the possibilities that are open between art and ecology, our condition as Da-seins, beings for

whom the world is made manifest in the form of cares or concerns, can provide guidance on the nature and scope of eco art. If I am an artist, I will want to make *something*, and this something will be set within a network of interests and concerns, including contender materials and technologies, and the discourses which surround them. It is an existential choice because art and ecology are concepts whose range is so broad that, when they are combined, no prior, stable meanings are left – for example, painting, sculpture, representation, expression, on the side of art, and nature, landscape, and environment, on the side of ecology – that can act as a point of stability, beyond the fact that we are situated beings. As far as the artist is concerned, it is going to be first and foremost a matter of their concern (repetition intended) in the phenomenological sense that, in their life, they will be inclined towards or directed towards something that is important or significant, something that stands out. This is aesthetics as ecology: in standing out, that something will have to adopt a sensory, bodily or technological form, and that form will have material or technological properties that can act upon other properties in causal, indexical and surprising ways, with the surprise feeding back to bring new, metaphorical properties to the original concern, thereby expanding the ways in which that original concern sits in the world.

So, how do I choose a concern for the purpose of the example? To suggest it is a matter of selecting an item from a shelf misses the point that, from a phenomenological perspective, concerns are always, already active as inclinations and openings that constitute one's being in the world. If the example is to occur from the point of view of the artist, then one might start from my emphasis on the aesthetic, from the something I sense I want to explore, work towards or make. This is not me smuggling in a property from the history of art after I have claimed that its nature is in question after conceptual art, for my concept situates the aesthetic as the process of disclosure whereby all things are made manifest. The main idea behind 'interested signification' is that any object or event does not have a set, intrinsic identity or essential nature. Instead, it will always appear in some form or other depending upon the faculties or interest with which it is approached. In philosophy, this is the millennia-old contest between appearances and things in themselves. Since Democritus and Plato, philosophy has maintained the idea of an object that exists in its own terms, terms that are essential, unchanging and

independent of the conditions in which the object finds itself and the modes of perception introduced by a perceiver. Against this are theses from Berkeley and Kant in the eighteenth century onwards to the effect that objects always appear in specific ways according to the sensory faculties or conceptual filters that organise perception, and that concepts judged to be essential or universal are in fact inclined to accommodate the particularity of the senses.¹⁰

Suppose I was an artist who was also a keen cyclist, and wanted to explore the possibility of cycling as a critical art practice. What form might this take? The particularity of the aesthetic gets to work straight away, for as soon as one starts to consider the prospect, one bumps up against the question of which aspect of cycling is meant: racing, touring, commuting, mountain-biking, family, leisure, social interaction, town planning, or the fact that it is not motoring? There is also the way in which the bicycle, as a technology, changes Da-sein, the state of being in the world. When I am sitting or standing, I am aware of myself as a mass, a weight, positioned at a point, the ground a single, continuous pressure felt through my feet and legs. I can move forward by the distance permitted by the span of my legs. After each leg movement, the ground is there to meet me again, another familiar feeling of counter-pressure. As I move, the scenery changes very slightly, new sections of wall or door or greenery appearing in step with my movement. But when I sit on a bike, the world is no longer a single pressure, whether through two standing legs or one leg as the other is in motion. Instead, pressure is felt through my backside and perineum on the saddle, my hands on the handlebars and my legs on the pedals. The points of contact are also not simple acts of pressure but rather push-pull relationships on the handlebars and the pedals. When I move, when I turn the pedals, there isn't the on-off pressure of footsteps but a continuous movement in my legs, much more of a rising and falling sensation. In keeping with the continuous movement of my legs, I am carried through space in a line, not so much in a state of gliding but one where I am aware of the road as a series of pressures and bumps on scales of gentle-harsh and round-edge felt through the saddle.

One word or concern, 'cycling', opens up into a variety of aesthetic possibilities. One option might be to pay further close attention to the bodily experience of cycling and

consider how this might be expressed on a public scale. Alternatively, cycling as an alternative to driving in a car might emerge as prominent, in which case thought could be given to the particularities arising from the difference between cycling and driving. One example might be the space occupied by car parks, and to recreate life-size parking lots on walls in buildings or to reproduce them through large-scale photographs, so that we are made aware of the space that is occupied by a car, and that textures in the tarmac, surface cracks, the worn white lines delineating the space, and the oil stains can become objects of new and greater concern.

This might sound like I am saying that, in terms of eco art, anything goes. But the response makes two errors. In asserting ‘*anything goes*’, it assumes that I am a detached, floating agent that can choose any aspect of life for the basis of an artwork whatsoever, with nothing to act as a guide or an indicator as to what might warrant attention. It essentially ignores the proposal from phenomenology that, as a *Da-sein*, I am always, already constituted by care, concern and openness, i.e. interests that have the potential to offer direction. Also, in asserting ‘*anything goes*’, it assumes that I can move entirely smoothly through the network of interests, concerns, materials, technologies and communities, arranging them so they satisfy my intention, when the point of this approach is that all these elements act as a nexus of forces, of which I am a part, with openings, alignments, intersections, redirections and resistances bringing new aspects to light, i.e. allowing cares and concerns to be expanded or transformed through new forms and appearances.

Conclusion

Eco art poses a problem to classification because its two terms have such broad meaning: after conceptual art, there are no restrictions on the material form art can take, and ecology covers notions of environment, nature, interactions with nature, interconnection, and a fundamental, ontological condition of belonging. Rather than try to contain the overwhelming number of relationships and formations that are possible under ‘eco art’, I accepted the existential nature of the situation and turned to

Heidegger's phenomenology, a forerunner of existentialism. This presents the human as an opening in the world without an essence, whose being is constituted by the always, already active nature of sensation, the body and technology as a series of cares and concerns. What this philosophy supplies is recognition of the fact that we are always, already inclined towards portions of the world as a result of these concerns.

Furthermore, it highlights that whatever we choose, reach for or make brings with it its own aesthetic qualities that offer what I termed 'interested signification', made up of: (1) particular, sensory detail; (2) properties that can create surprising effects through their causal interaction with adjacent materials; and (3) a further capacity to surprise through the metaphors that are created between these effects and the original interest. The ecological value of this process, taking 'ecology' in its broadest and oldest sense of belonging, is that objects and concepts that might ordinarily be seen as remote or unrelated to us are shown to have a power and a possibility for expression which can surprise, interrupt or present itself as an alternative to routine, object-directed, goal-directed perception.

One objection to this approach might be the point, often made against aesthetics, that whatever form is presented can be dismissed as just one more image or display or performance. The predicament is arguably becoming worse in the era of the interactive screen, when content can be dismissed with the swipe of a finger. The 'aesthetic' is customarily reserved as the adjective for describing the domain in which art is active critically, and so the political or ecological force of art is in question if an art event or proposition can be disregarded as one more 'whatever'. But on the account I have given here, the aesthetic also qualifies the way in which we are bodily and technologically situated in the world, and the way in which all concepts and concerns can be made particular through the senses. If the lack of care (in the general sense) for ecology or in what art can do in relation to ecology is the problem, then maybe a future eco art project might have as its concern (in the phenomenological sense) the question of how to make care and its absence the subject of the senses, indexicality and metaphor.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. Katie Paterson, *Vatnajökull (the sound of)*, 2007/8. Hydrophone, mobile phone, amplifier, neon. Installation view, Iceland, 2007. Photo © Katie Paterson, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 2. Katie Paterson, *Vatnajökull (the sound of)*, 2007/8. Hydrophone, mobile phone, amplifier, neon. Installation view, Modern Art Oxford, 2008. Photo © Katie Paterson, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

Notes

¹ Hanfling, O. (1992). 'The problem of definition', in O. Hanfling (ed.), *Philosophical Aesthetics*. Milton Keynes and Oxford: Open University and Blackwell, pp. 1–40; this reference pp. 7–8.

³ Hughes, J.D. (1985). 'Theophrastus as ecologist', *Environmental Review* 9, no. 4, pp. 296–306.

⁴ I have adopted the hyphenated spelling of 'Da-sein' as used by Stambaugh in her recent translation of *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1996). 'It was Heidegger's express wish', she writes, 'that in future translations the word *Dasein* should be hyphenated' (p. xiv; original italics). Heidegger's thinking, Stambaugh continues, was that, with hyphenation,

the reader will be less prone to assume he or she understands it to refer to 'existence' (which is the orthodox translation of *Dasein*) and with that translation surreptitiously bring along all sorts of psychological connotations. It was Heidegger's insight that human being is *uncanny*: we do not know who, or what, that is, although, or perhaps precisely because, we *are* it.

(Heidegger 1996: xiv; original italics)

The hyphen in Da-sein introduces a sense of the uncanny. Rather than having Da-sein remain as a word which refers straightforwardly to human being as a clearly circumscribed thing – to existence or to the subject – the hyphen maintains the reference to us but at the same time makes it other than us. It emphasises that human being is distributed in a way that dualistic, Cartesian, subject–object terminology does not easily accommodate: a ‘being there’, an entity whose *being* is located and extended *in the world*.

⁵ For a good definition of *Sorge*, see Inwood, M. (1999). *A Heidegger Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 35–7.

⁶ Although, given Weintraub’s investment in the categorisation of eco art, it is not surprising that her introduction to the survey is an account of what eco art is and *what it is not*. Some artworks that seek to be ecological by considering the interests of *nonhuman* life, she argues, end up doing so in very *human* terms. Nature is approached as ‘a medium of exchange, a source of wealth, a repository of resources, and a depository for waste’ (Weintraub 2012: 16). Such works, she asserts, are not eco art. For example, Andy Warhol’s 1964 lithograph *Flowers* is disregarded because its production process ‘encapsulates the anthropocentric reliance upon commerce and industry’ (Weintraub 2012: 11), and Walter De Maria’s earth sculpture *Lightning Field* from 1977 is dismissed because of the constant restoration work that is needed to maintain its 400 steel poles after damage from lightning strikes is judged to be in defiance of the decay inherent in ecosystem dynamics (Weintraub 2012: 14). The problem with this distinction, however, is it relies on the idea that ‘human’ and ‘nature’ can be neatly separated out. It also fails to consider the critical potential of working with certain technologies to achieve aesthetic effects that call attention to the different ways in which physical forces can manifest themselves.

⁷ For Peirce’s introduction of the concept of an indexical sign, see Peirce, C.S. (1982). *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, Volume 2, ed. Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁸ The key paper in this, the interaction theory of metaphor, is Black, M. (1993). 'More about metaphor', in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 19-41.

⁹ A good account of indexical drawing is given by Iversen, M. (2012). 'Index, diagram, graphic trace'. *Tate Papers Issue 18*. Online: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/index-diagram-graphic-trace> (accessed 12 November 2015).

¹⁰ For a good introduction to Berkeley's philosophy, read his own work, especially *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, in Berkeley, G. (1975). *Philosophical Works; Including the Works on Vision*, ed. M. Ayers. London: Dent. As the builder of a complex philosophical system, Kant is not so easy to read in the original. A good introduction to his epistemology and the place of the senses within it is Strawson, P. (1966). *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Methuen. The book is also good on pointing out the similarities and differences between Berkeley and Kant.