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Series: *Philosophy, Communication, Media Sciences*

Volume: *Communication Today: An Overview from Online Journalism to Applied Philosophy*

# The ‘Environmental’ Model as a Philosophical Framework for Analyzing Everyday Aesthetics as Environmental Communication

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## Abstract

*This study has a twofold aim. First of all, to address the presence of everyday aesthetic qualities in the context of environmental communication through environmental action. Secondly, to provide a philosophical framework for analyzing the nature of the presence of everyday aesthetics in the context of environmental communication.*

## Keywords

Everyday aesthetics; environmental aesthetics; ecology; environmental communication; environmental model

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DOI: 10.22618/TP.PCMS.20164.349029

## I. Framework of research

First, our approach will deal with a 'fuzzy' object: the environmental action, which is not commonly classified as an 'aesthetic' object per se, sometimes not even as an object having aesthetic qualities. It generally is more like a human situation which may or may not claim aesthetic (or artistic) appreciation.

Second, the research will try to situate the environmental action within the framework both of environmental aesthetics<sup>1</sup> and everyday aesthetics<sup>2</sup> in trying to find links between the two approaches, which are not fully congruent. With Brady,<sup>3</sup> we are aware that the refuelled aesthetic theoretical debate following the re-birth of environmental aesthetics at the beginning of the 70's and the birth of 'earth art' in the 60's starts with several classic conundrums: the relation between appreciations of the artistic and the aesthetic appreciation of nature; the difference between an *environment* and an *artwork* as 'objects' of aesthetic theory; the criteria for appreciation in cases where there are no artistic 'conventions' to guide us through, no 'art history' and no 'artistic intentions' (Brady). Hepburn<sup>4</sup> is also one of the first to address these issues.

Third, our approach will seek to relate philosophical 'environmental' thinking (Dewey, McDermott) with the field of 'everyday aesthetics' (Arnold Berleant), thus providing the necessary link for the explanation of the 'everyday aesthetics' as based on an 'environmental' model (or 'ecosystemic model'<sup>5</sup>). At this point, one is already aware that environmental action is just the product of an environmental thinking and ethics, which puts 'nature' and 'experience' (Dewey) at the same level. Yet, the environmental communication that results from the purposeful environmental action – our focus of research – is also based on an 'environmental' pattern, model or philosophy of communication. Thus, 'environment' is not just a language – philosophically speaking, it is also a metalanguage. John Dewey, e.g., doesn't take the 'order of coherence' for the 'order of experience'. He leaves room for experience (including aesthetic experience) to be understood as a natural process, as *aisthēsis*. To Dewey, mind is not abstracted from reality, it is not "something self-contained and self-enclosed". It is reality, as 'experience' or as he claims, "total experience". The 'in us/outside us' differences are just "abstractions" (ibid.). Mind and body are of the same reality. Actually, the "aesthetic understanding" becomes the only way to truly and thoroughly understand the reality of the world. Aesthetics (through art) becomes a witness to the best kind of "communication" there is, which is the aesthetic communication (communication being the experience of communication), following Dewey. This answers the question referring to why the artistic (or aesthetic) object – the focus of aesthetic experience - is probably the best and the most appropriate way for communication in society

<sup>1</sup> See: Emily Brady, 'Environmental Aesthetics', in *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, ed. J.B. Callicott and R. Frodeman (New York: Gale Publishers, 2008): 313-321. Allen Carlson, 'Is Environmental Art an Aesthetic Affront to Nature?', in: ibid., *Aesthetics and The Environment* (London: Routledge, 2005), 150-163. R.W. Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', in *British Analytical Philosophy*, ed. B. Williams, A. Montefiore (London: Routledge, 1966), 285-310.

<sup>2</sup> See: Arnold Berleant, 'Ideas for a social aesthetic', in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Andrew Light and Jonathan Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 23-38; Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Imprint Academic, 2010); Crispin Sartwell, 'Aesthetics of the Everyday', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. J. Levinson 2009. online: [www.oxfordhandbooks.com](http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com); Dan-Eugen Ratiu, "Remapping the Realm of Aesthetics: On Recent Controversies about the Aesthetic and the Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Life," in *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 4 (2012): 385–411.

<sup>3</sup> Brady, 'Environmental Aesthetics', 316.

<sup>4</sup> R.W. Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', in *British Analytical Philosophy*, ed. B. Williams, A. Montefiore (London: Routledge, 1966), 285-310.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 120.

(in our case, environmental communication).

## II. Communication as a starting point

We cannot speak of environmental action which is inspired by or inspiring environmental aesthetics (making use of the expression in a broad sense) without picturing environmental action, as well as aesthetics, as strategies pertaining - in one sense or another - to environmental communication. Here, we are referring to the basic Wikipedia definition of 'environmental communication' as 'related to the study and practice of how individuals, institutions, societies, and cultures craft, distribute, receive, understand, and use messages about the environment and human interactions with the environment'. This entails 'a wide range of possible interactions, from interpersonal communication to virtual communities, participatory decision making, and environmental media coverage'. According to the same Wikipedia definition, environmental communication (hereafter EC) may be defined as 'symbolic action' which brings about two main features: a 'pragmatic' one and a 'constitutive' one. The pragmatic function of EC contributes to 'accomplishing goals and literally doing things through communication,' such as 'educating, alerting, persuading.' The 'constitutive' function refers to basically informing and also changing people's views about environmental issues. This, in its turn, involves the self-transformation of peoples' minds, as well as introducing a new view about nature in general. According to Milstein,<sup>6</sup> EC functions as a mediation between 'environment' and 'humans'. However, EC plays a double role: it both 'reflects' and 'constructs' human relations with reference to the environment. This is because, according to Milstein, EC is a two-step process: communication reflects and also 'affects' our 'perceptions of the living world;'<sup>7</sup> in consequence, it not only represents, but also transforms our relating to nature as well as our own *actions* towards nature; it also reshapes our self-perceived status within nature. EC theories also consider, in Milstein's view, that all communication pertaining to environmental issues relies on representations which are 'interested', motivated by "social, economic and political contexts and interests."<sup>8</sup> These representations of nature as 'environment' both are reflect and transformed, even created, by our various interests. It is thus evident that even the sublime response to nature (including the aesthetic one) may rely on (not so obvious) social or political interests. If we take environmental aesthetics as a form of EC, even its most far-off, 'disinterested' reactions may be rooted in all kinds of human motivations.

As for the widely circulated term 'environment', Milstein refers to it as an instance of "material-symbolic discourse,"<sup>9</sup> where the reality of 'environment' as referring to a material, physical process helps the structuring of the figurative side of the term. 'Environment' literally signifies material nature; this connotation, in its own turn, informs the other side of 'environment,' the 'environment' *metaphor*. The meaning of the metaphor is thus shaped by the constitution of the material environment reflected by the same term. "Material world is helping to shape communication (...) communication is helping to shape the material world."<sup>10</sup> The mediated effect physical nature has on communication is reflected back to it by the negotiating and transformative power of EC. Symbols, informed by nature, have the power to shape human minds, which, in their turn, act directly upon it. Environmental action

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<sup>6</sup> Tema Milstein, 'Environmental Communication Theories', in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, ed. S.W. Littlejohn & Karen A. Foss, vol. 1. (London: Sage, 2009), 344-348.

<sup>7</sup> Milstein, 'Environmental Communication Theories', 345.

<sup>8</sup> Id. *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Milstein, 'Environmental Communication Theories', 346.

<sup>10</sup> Id. *ibid.*

is thus as real as the real process it represents.<sup>11</sup>

Usually, Milstein argues, theories about 'environment' tend to echo a focus on 'anthropocentric, human-centered, cultural views' with relation to Earth and Nature (346). Only phenomenology, in our case represented by Arnold Berleant's reflections upon phenomenology, art and nature, had a tendency to challenge anthropological views about nature and to claim for instituting an equilibrated, non-hierarchical relation between humans and nature, thus "stitching the human back into the fabric of the Earth."<sup>12</sup>

### III. Fuzzy objects

In aesthetic terms, this research will try to situate the environmental action within the framework both of environmental aesthetics (Brady, Carlson, Hepburn) and everyday aesthetics (Berleant, Sartwell), in trying to find links between the two approaches, which are not fully congruent. With Brady,<sup>13</sup> we are aware that the refueled aesthetic theoretical debate following the re-birth of environmental aesthetics at the beginning of the '70's and the birth of 'earth art' in the '60's starts with several classic conundrums: the relation between appreciations of the artistic and the aesthetic appreciation of nature; the difference between an *environment* and an *artwork* as 'objects' of aesthetic theory; the criteria for appreciation in cases where there are no artistic 'conventions' to guide us through, no 'art history' and no 'artistic intentions' (Brady). Hepburn (1966) is one of the first to address these issues, he himself being committed to maintaining the difference between an aesthetic of the appreciation of nature and an aesthetic of artistic appreciation.

Our approach thus deals with a kind of 'fuzzy' object: as a case of environmental communication/ environmental action<sup>14</sup>, the environmental protest is not commonly classified as an 'aesthetic' object per se, not even as an object having aesthetic qualities. A protest in general is more like a human situation which may or may not claim aesthetic (or artistic) appreciation. This kind of human situation may or may not be fit to sustain an 'aesthetic social situation' (Berleant), i.e. a situation that attracts aesthetic appreciation. A protest can be physically peaceful or violent. It can be also peaceful (physically) but with a violent, in the sense of morally offending, message. Or it can be peaceful, non-offending, yet aesthetically repugnant (or aesthetically dull, dead). Also violent, offending, yet with a certain aesthetical value; or: peaceful, offending, and aesthetically valuable. A protest may raise disturbing questions regarding the possibility of discussing an aesthetic appreciation in cases of physical violence and/or moral offense. If it is physically or morally offensive, can it still be considered 'aesthetic'?<sup>15</sup> It also raises awareness about the moral and socio-political implications of 'objects' (things, actions) supposed to have aesthetic qualities.

A protest is by itself an ephemeral situation, a hybrid between organization and spontaneity,

<sup>11</sup> To this approach, see the critique of 'environment' in Phillips, Dana. *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 36 ff.: "environments are in fact entities that we have posited but have never observed in the wild, and never will".

<sup>12</sup> Milstein, 'Environmental Communication Theories', 347.

<sup>13</sup> Brady, 'Environmental Aesthetics', 316.

<sup>14</sup> I understand every environmental action as representing a potential form of EC as well. Usually, there is a difference between direct and indirect environmental action. Indirect environmental action has been defined as "voluntary and intentional action targeted at influencing other people or structures in society in order to decrease the impact on the environment", whereas "direct actions intend to directly decrease the impact on the environment (...) indirect actions intend to influence other people to decrease the impact on the environment. In that sense, direct actions are characterised by the relation between people and the environment, while indirect actions are characterised by the relation between people." (Henriksson, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> See Berleant's discussion on 'negative aesthetics' in: Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 149 ff.

rational motivation and feeling, human action and human (or natural) accident, ritual and playfulness, art and human emotion. A protest is a situation relating to a certain human action, created by human intentions, in opposition (apparently) to the natural environment. It is certainly influenced by the natural environment (the environmental one) and by the human intervention upon the natural environment, yet it is mainly a result of human actions and intentions. It may also foster artistic creativity, as it is obvious that sometimes artists and their artworks are involved directly in the organizing and publicizing of these manifestations. It is usually apparent that aesthetic motivation is not the *main* purpose of these events, but rather a political, moral or social one. Usually, because as Stoeihrel and Lindgren<sup>16</sup> argue, the new counter-movements that protest online and offline against the governments (the case of *Anonymous*) are not stirred by political passions, but by 'protest affect' that does not have an obvious political motivation, but an individualistic one, as this kind of protest is not so much related to political resistance as it is to 'one's intensive sense of identity and meaning of life'<sup>17</sup>. In other words, the protesters' activity is enhanced by an activism that is both affective and aesthetic-symbolic, of a 'prankish nature', motivated by self-exaltation, 'joyful passions' and 'personal enjoyment' or 'collective enjoyment' in small, usually apolitical hacker communities.<sup>18</sup> In the end, we may argue that the 'hacker's', the 'troll's', the 'leaker's' motivation is guided by more personal (individualistic) and 'aesthetic' goals (self-identity, self-image), than by social and political ones. Perhaps this is why these networks tend to work in and with anonymity rather than with 'openness', as sometimes their members consciously trespass social, moral codes and conveniences and even legal thresholds.

The discussion about the aesthetic motivations remains open,<sup>19</sup> as long as the main strategy of environmental activism is the 'unorthodox tactic of staging image events as the primary rhetorical activity of environmental groups that are radically challenging and even changing public consciousness in the US.'<sup>20</sup> In other words, the main purpose seems to be aesthetic or 'rhetorical,' self-image, in order to change public opinion and *then* the balance of power: "social protest rhetoric primarily serves the ego function of self-affirmation for the protesters."<sup>21</sup>

However, in terms of the historical aesthetic relevance of politics, war, for example, has been glorified in art since the dawn of history, as it was with the revolutionary protest at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century on: Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830), for example, is a perfect case of high art glorifying political violence and protest in the name of the people.

#### IV. "Aesthetic ecology"

The phrase 'aesthetic ecology' is certainly new,<sup>22</sup> but the idea behind it is not. Timothy Morton<sup>23</sup> discovers a long and respectable philosophical tradition of 'aesthetic ecology', starting with the Romantics and Hegel. "Aesthetics" joins "nature" within the ideological struggles of the 18-th century

<sup>16</sup> See Rodrigo Ferrada Stoeihrel and Simon Lindgren, 'For the Lulz: Anonymous, Aesthetics and Affect', in *tripleC* 12.1 (2014): 238-264.

<sup>17</sup> Stoeihrel & Lindgren, 'For the Lulz: Anonymous, Aesthetics and Affect', 239.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Michael De Luca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> De Luca, *Image Politics*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> De Luca, *Image Politics*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert Reid and Betsy Taylor, 'John Dewey's Aesthetic Ecology of Public Intelligence and the Grounding of Civic Environmentalism', in *Ethics & The Environment*, 8.1 (2003): 79; Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 113.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge (Mass.): HUP, 2007).

philosophies of counter-Enlightenment against the unequivocal interpretation of science regarding nature. Moreover, Morton argues that the notion of “nature” played a double, duplicitous role in its relation to scientism, acting both as an ‘essence’ (‘nature’ cannot be represented as a substance, is an ‘abstract principle’, is not an external authority per se) and as a ‘substance’ (‘nature’ is something real, external, it exerts authority). Throughout the 18-th century, ‘nature’ appears as dual and elusive, supporting and undermining at the same time the values of scientism: ‘nature in itself flickers between things – it is both/and or neither/or (...) We discover how nature always slips out of reach in the very act of grasping it.’<sup>24</sup> Morton argues that ‘nature’ played a threefold role in the language of the Enlightenment period: it was first a ‘host of other concepts’; secondly, it was seen as a ‘law’ or ‘norm’, something against which the ‘abnormal’ was considered; thirdly, it was ‘nature’ as ‘fantasy,’ a hypothetic locus of infinite possibility of fantasy; it was the locus of the power of imagination itself: “*nature* wavers in between the divine and the material. Far from being something ‘natural’ itself, nature hovers over things like a ghost. It slides over the infinite list of things that evoke it.”<sup>25</sup> This ambiguity of essence/substance generated the ambivalence, the paradox in defining nature as “the set and the contents of the set (...) the world and the entities in that world”<sup>26</sup>. Nature, thus, becomes more than an object: it becomes a medium, an environment. It is not hard to see, following Morton’s argument, that ‘aesthetics,’ a term coupled with ‘nature’ in the writings of Kant and the Romantics, began to share the same features as the ones that were shown as being related to ‘nature:’ ‘aesthetics’ as ‘host’ to other concepts, ‘aesthetics’ acting as a place for establishing ‘law’ and ‘norm’ in the matters of taste, ‘aesthetics’ as seeking both the status of an essence and substance, ‘aesthetics’ as a locus of infinite possibilities of ‘fantasy.’ Being set in a close relation to ‘nature’, aesthetics, in its own turn, began to influence the understanding of nature by spinning an ‘ambient poetics’, a particular way of seeing nature as a non-identical, elusive, fanciful entity, by ‘conjuring up a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world.’<sup>27</sup> ‘Nature’ and ‘aesthetics’ grew together and influenced each other throughout the Age of Reason. ‘Nature’ and ‘aesthetics’ both became involved in ‘healing’ alienation, the gap between human being and his world. In closely following ‘nature’ as its counterpart, ‘aesthetics’ inherited and became entrenched in the ambivalence of essence/substance. As well as nature, it bore the characteristics of an ‘environment,’ explaining the aesthetic world as being both a ‘world’ and the particular ‘things’ of this world. Art and nature both became “the new secular churches in which subject and object can be remarried.”<sup>28</sup>

“Aesthetic ecology” is the successor of the ‘environmental language’<sup>29</sup> of the Romantics. The environmental language will envision the aesthetic appreciation in terms of a ‘natural’ *experience*. Experience, in an environmental sense, means that ‘we are embedded in our world.’<sup>30</sup> ‘Experience’ becomes tantamount to ‘environment’ in the sense that it is, in fact, ‘environmental.’ Aesthetics may just be witnessing the fact that our experience with aesthetic objects is part of a ‘natural’ experience (the meaning of ‘natural’ will transform itself historically) where the subject is basically *immersed* into the object, or part of the object, so that the distinction (subject-object) fails to give account of the real nature of the experience. After the Romantics and after the gradual disappearance of a metaphysics of nature, natural experience, as well as aesthetic experience, its counterpart, have become more and more sensorial (respectively perceptual), yet their explanation was still based on the environmental

<sup>24</sup> Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Id. *ibid.*, 14.

Id. *ibid.*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Id. *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Id. *ibid.*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Id. *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Id. *ibid.*, 62.

model. The same explanatory model will be transferred to the entire array of aesthetic experience. Hermeneutics and phenomenology, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, will describe the aesthetic appreciation of nature as well as the appreciation of artworks by appealing to the same environmental model: the aesthetic experience of artworks is tantamount to the aesthetic experience of nature; they are both 'environmental.' The aesthetics of Dewey, seeking to 'recovering the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living'<sup>31</sup> is precisely the pragmatist version of the environmental model drawn from a naturalistic view of nature towards an 'environmental' aesthetics. Dewey's basic term, 'experience', is precisely the link between the environmental explanation of nature and the environmental explanation of art.

Arnold Berleant's 'everyday aesthetics' is based on the same 'environmental' model (or 'ecosystemic model'<sup>32</sup>) discussed before, which he draws from both pragmatism and phenomenology. As well as Dewey, Berleant's basic concept is 'experience'; his understanding of 'experience' is also environmental.<sup>33</sup> As well as Dewey, he doesn't take the 'order of coherence' for the 'order of experience', leaving room for experience (including aesthetic experience) to be understood as a natural process, as *aisthēsis*. Actually, *aisthēsis* as experience could be the missing link between nature and culture, a concept based on a theoretical model that could explain things in culture as closely as they could actually be: "aesthetic experience seems to transcend the barriers that ordinarily separate ourselves from the things we encounter in the world."<sup>34</sup> To Dewey, mind is not abstracted from reality, it is not "something self-contained and self-enclosed."<sup>35</sup> It is reality, as 'experience' or as he claims, "total experience."<sup>36</sup> The 'in us/outside us' differences are just "abstractions" (ibid.). Mind and body are part of the same reality. Actually, the "aesthetic understanding" becomes the only way to truly and thoroughly understand the reality of the world. Aesthetics (through art) becomes a witness to the best kind of "communication" there is, which is the aesthetic communication.<sup>37</sup> In Dewey's analysis, the relation between 'sense and meaning', 'actuality and possibility', the 'new and the old', 'objective material and personal response, the 'individual and the universal, surface and depth' is best understood through the lens of aesthetic experience, as being "integrated in an experience in which they are all transfigured from the significance that belongs to them when isolated in reflection."<sup>38</sup> The theory that sets the difference between "self and the world" is just the 'reinforced bias' of the "professional thinker" whose theories are just "fatal" to the aesthetic worldview.<sup>39</sup> Jan Jagodziński's<sup>40</sup> 'green aesthetics' is just the one step further towards the explanation of aesthetics as being really close to nature as environment.

We may take as the focus of our research environmentalist – in this case, indirect -actions in Romania. Romanian environmentalism may only serve here as an example to the theories discussed.<sup>41</sup> Although the involvement of the artists into the environmental campaigns in Romania has already

<sup>31</sup> John Dewey, *Art as experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1934), 10.

<sup>32</sup> via Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 120.

<sup>33</sup> *Sensibility and Sense*, 7 ff.

<sup>34</sup> Id. ibid., 26.

<sup>35</sup> Dewey, *Art as experience*, 264.

<sup>36</sup> Id. ibid., 251.

<sup>37</sup> Communication being the experience of communication, see: Dewey, *Art as experience*, 244.

<sup>38</sup> Id. ibid., 297.

<sup>39</sup> Id. ibid., 249.

<sup>40</sup> J. Jagodziński, 'Toward an Ecological Aesthetic: Notes on a "Green" Frame of Mind', in *Art in a democracy*, ed. D. Blandy and Congdon, K. (New York: Columbia University, Teachers College, 1987), 138-163.

<sup>41</sup> There is a vast literature on environmental activism available nowadays. See Szasz, Andrew. *Ecopolitism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, for a good initiation.

been discussed<sup>42</sup> there is no discussion available on the aesthetic significance of these protests as such. Our suggestion is that these protests may carry aesthetic value within their process, as any other situation involving societal relations and social communication can: “any meaningful situation in human relations can become the focus of aesthetic attention” (Berleant). According to Berleant’s thesis, human social relations manifest themselves as experiential processes, involving types of *experiences* (sensorial, perceptual, cognitive) that can carry “environmental” (within a human-human environment) and “aesthetic” features that make them equivalent to those of aesthetic experience in general. In Berleant’s words, this ‘social aesthetic’ may be “a *kind* of environmental aesthetics”, as the social experience can be both perceptual and meaningful. There are several characteristics which transform a social relation into an “aesthetic social situation”: ““full acceptance of others”, “heightened perception, particularly of sensuous qualities”, “the freshness and excitement of discovery”, “recognition of the uniqueness of the person and the situation” “mutual responsiveness”, “an occasion experienced as connected and integrated”, “the abandonment of separatedness for full personal involvement”, “a relinquishing of the restrictions and exclusivity that obstruct appreciation” (Berleant). The analysis of Berleant<sup>43</sup> is synthesized in Table 1 and Table 2 below:

**Table 1 (Berleant 2005):**

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Aesthetic situation (contextual aesthetics)</i>	<i>Aesthetic social situation</i>
<b>Acceptance</b>	‘a quality of aesthetic appreciation’	‘full acceptance of others’
<b>Perception</b>	‘aesthetic perception’	‘heightened perception, particularly of sensuous qualities’
<b>Sensuousness</b>	‘synaesthesia’	social ‘synaesthesia’
<b>Discovery</b>	‘perceptual awareness’	‘the freshness and excitement of discovery’
<b>Uniqueness</b>	‘every experience is perceptually unique’	‘recognition of the uniqueness of the person and the situation’
<b>Reciprocity</b>	‘the experience of an art object is deeply affected by the knowledge of the person who joins with it’	‘mutual responsiveness’
<b>Continuity</b>	‘living experience of an aesthetic situation’	‘an occasion experienced as connected and integrated’
<b>Engagement</b>	no ‘aesthetic distance’	‘the abandonment of separatedness for full personal involvement’

<sup>42</sup> Mara Ratiu and Bogdan Iacob, “‘Digitalization’ of Art Activism. Case Study of the Cluj-based Collective MindBomb,” in *Ekphrasis* 2 (2013): 197-211.

<sup>43</sup> Arnold Berleant, ‘Ideas for a social aesthetic’ in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, ed. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 23-38.

<b>Multiplicity</b>	‘the occasions on which aesthetic appreciation can develop are unlimited’	‘a relinquishing of the restrictions and exclusivity that obstruct appreciation’
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**Table 2 (Berleant 2005):**

<i>Aesthetic social situation</i>	<i>Description</i>
<b>Theatre</b>	‘theater embodies a social aesthetic ’
<b>Architecture</b>	‘architecture organizes an entire environment’
<b>Film, television</b>	‘the nature of these media determines and shapes the qualitative character of the experiences they generate’
<b>Etiquette</b>	‘when grace occurs, discovery, perception, reciprocity, and the other aesthetic features overcome the sterile formalism often associated with etiquette’
<b>Primitive rituals</b>	‘ <i>Foi</i> society (a tribe in Papua) is constituted aesthetically’
<b>Love</b>	‘the general resemblances of love to aesthetic contact, continuity, participation ... suggest an isomorphism between these two most human experiences’
<b>Ceremonies, celebrations, festivals</b>	‘living drama occurs at other ceremonies, celebrations and festivals ’

Thus, an environmental protest may be explained as an “aesthetic social situation,” according to the model put forward by Berleant, in relation to the meaningfulness and the creativity of its performance. A protest is a social event that captures and conveys certain symbolisms. It is a quasi-ritualized event, where the participants behave in a certain way, often described as symbolic (certain dress, certain symbols, certain gestures, written and spoken messages etc.). Aesthetically, it resembles religious rituals or other social rituals (ceremonial gatherings). For example, participants wear masks, dress in a certain way, walk or sit in a certain way in a certain location for a certain symbolic purpose, carry flags or banners containing a specific message, shout slogans, dance, sing, perform. A protest is a human performance in itself. It is often performed as a ‘show’ in a public space, it seeks public and media attention. It can be also mediatized by other media outlets. Sometimes, it appears as a real image event: it may be supported by artists (visual artists, musicians) or by media celebrities.

## VI. Social 'environments'

At this point, we may discuss both the “environmental” view on society and the connection between everyday aesthetic experience and social processes. In the light of what has been said about experience in general or “total experience”, we may assume that society may and needs to be explained in more “natural” terms, as part of the general “environmental” picture of reality. Thus, society, as well as art, is ultimately a human product and therefore explainable in terms of a continuous and living *common* “experience” or process (Dewey refers to “participation” as being one of the key features of human communication). Environmentalism is therefore just a natural reaction of humans in respect to their “total experience” or general medium (social as well as natural). There is basically no essential difference between a human environment and a natural environment. The humans’ reaction against the destruction of the natural environment (inflicted by their own actions) is just as natural as the reaction of living things defending their habitat. The difference is that the human response is a result of reflection, not just instinct (although within the “environmental” worldview the difference between reflection and instinct will also need to be reconsidered). Aesthetic experience, ultimately, is just as “environmental” as the social experience. The communication between aesthetics and society at this point is particularly strong, since art, as ‘environmental’ experience, would act as an ‘environmental’ role model to society, thus strengthening society’s decision to keep up with the protection (preservation) and re-naturalizing of the destroyed or threatened (human-natural) environment. The unity of experience that art envisions through its particular medium (imagination) is projected back onto society. Even negatively<sup>44</sup> or (counter-intuitively) destructively, through ‘Eco-Art’ (Carlson), art still raises our hopes for a unity of experience. The “imaginative experience” of art<sup>45</sup> is a sign of that, as this represents the “heart of the moral potency of art”. “Nature has neither kernel nor shell” wrote Dewey, while quoting Goethe.

## VII. Critique of Berleant’s ‘aesthetic social situations’

Before continuing with questioning some of Berleant’s suggestions about aesthetic social situations, it may be useful that some attention should be raised towards the basic concepts which are ubiquitous in our discussions about environmental aesthetics and everyday aesthetics, but are rarely in the spotlight. I have in mind here terms such as ‘nature’ and ‘experience’, which are main elements to the conceptual structure that explains theories of everydayness and environmentality.

Let us have a look at ‘nature’. According to Soper,<sup>46</sup> the entire discussion about ‘nature’ revolves around human action and human intentionality, since the basic discrimination that we should bring up for discussion is that between humans and nature: is human action independent from nature? Can we have an ‘a priori’ distinction between humans and nature? Soper argues that there are two aspects about nature which are unique and pervasive: first, that ‘nature’ has always been the ‘idea through which we conceptualize ‘the other’ to ourselves’; second, that even if we experience nature as being ubiquitous and part of the everyday, ‘the nature which preceded human history no longer exists anywhere.’<sup>47</sup> In her analysis, Soper actually discovers that there are *kinds* of ‘nature,’ and that we do not speak of just one ‘nature’ when we use the term in our everyday speech. There is thus a Cosmological ‘Nature’, in the case of which nature is ‘both that which we are not and that which we are within’. This idea of nature is the one that rejects Man’s superiority over Nature. The other ‘nature’

<sup>44</sup> The “aesthetically negative” revealing the “morally negative”, as in Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 161.

<sup>45</sup> Dewey, *Art as experience*, 349.

<sup>46</sup> Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non Human* (London: Blackwell, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Soper, *What Is Nature?*, 16, quoting Marx.

we refer usually to is Human 'Nature,' which is sometimes looked upon as being 'essential' to Man, yet opposed to Nature. About Human Nature, there are basically two perspectives, Soper argues: the 'human nature' as *anti-nature* view and the 'human nature' as *nature* view, or the 'realist' view. She coins these as the 'nature-endorsing', i.e. the 'realist' view and the 'culturalist' view as the 'nature-exposing' view. The Nature-endorsing view can be both conservative and progressive ('nature is appealed to in validation of that which we would either seek to preserve or seek to instigate in place of existing actuality'). The Nature-exposing view endorses human 'nature' as human culture and can be also both conservative (cultural determinism) and progressive.<sup>48</sup> Concerning the relation between Romanticism and Nature, which it has been argued here, Soper contends that Romanticism's view of Nature is itself distinguishable as a Nature-endorsing view, a 'realist' view which can be either conservative or progressive, in the sense that it inspired *either* the liberation of human 'nature' from the culturalist repression of the senses and the body in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – 'nature' unleashed is here viewed progressively, as it enthuses new features and also new futures for men and societies in this process of liberation – *or* the conservative defense of humans and societies from modern civilization, with appeal to the 'myths' and 'morals' of a presupposed untamed, undomesticated, pure natural potential. This conservative view, as well as the progressive, has its own backsides and trappings, since it may endorse irrational, adventurous and thorny nuances in viewing nature as a safeguard against progress: 'The Romantic conception of 'Nature' as an essentially innocent and benevolent power has played a key role in the discourse of sexual and social emancipation from Blake and Shelley through the 'flower power' politics of the sixties and much of the ecological argument of our own time. Liberating the 'nature' within or without us has been a constant theme of emancipatory discourse (and one might argue, some reference to a 'repressed' nature) is a condition of the coherence of any such talk). But we should not forget the irrationalities and repressions to which this 'nature libertarianism' can also lend itself.'<sup>49</sup>

'Experience' is a term almost impossible to tackle as well. Suffice to say that the importance of the term to philosophy is overwhelming.<sup>50</sup> However, anthropology brings a different take on the matter, more suitable to our discussion. In anthropological terms, 'experience,' first and foremost, may be different from culture to culture. In our own culture, accordingly, "experience itself is a deeply coded word"<sup>51</sup>. The anthropologist Victor Turner<sup>52</sup> associates the term *experience* etymologically with the Indo-European '- *per*' or the Greek *peraō*. In Turner's view 'experience,' which originates from *peraō*, shares a common meaning with 'pirates' and 'peril,' which come from the same Greek root. Etymologically, Turner asserts, 'experience' is already coded into our language as a term that suggests situations out-of-the-ordinary. By extension to culture in general, "experience" thus records meaningful yet uncommon situations in everyday life. Nevertheless, anthropologists such as Abrahams argue that the frequent, almost universal usage of the term 'experience' within our culture brings about a peculiar and paradoxical aspect: by reflecting actions that are significant and perhaps unique, 'experience' at the same time transforms the situation one is referring to into a 'typical, formal

<sup>48</sup> Soper, *What Is Nature?*, 15-34.

<sup>49</sup> Soper, *What Is Nature?*, 31-32.

<sup>50</sup> For a quick introduction to the subject, see: Laurent Cournarie, *L'expérience* (Notes de Cours), at: <http://www.philopsis.fr/spip.php?article193>.

<sup>51</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, 'Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience', in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana IL: U of Illinois Press, 1986), 45-72.

<sup>52</sup> Victor W. Turner, 'Dewey, Dilthey and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience', in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana IL: U of Illinois Press, 1986), 33-45.

and representative' case.<sup>53</sup> In a strange twist, qualities such as 'actuality, literality of matter, peculiar authenticity, authority' are deteriorating precisely the nature of the real, singular experience one is so anxious to determine, to experience and to safeguard for one's memories. Paradoxically, precisely the 'singularity' quality our language is so used to ascribe to these situations destroys the very authenticity and singularity of the unique situation at hand: 'by elevating our actions to stories and even more dramatic replays, we lose some of the spirit that resides in actions simply because they are humdrum.' Why don't we open our interest to 'depressed states of boredom, lassitude, even dispiritedness,' asks Abrahams?<sup>54</sup> Therefore, language always codes 'experience' as significant and transforms the real thing into something which is 'representatively anecdotic' to our own culture. Qualities such as individuality, authenticity, novelty, spontaneity, fear of boredom, uniqueness, originality, and more recently 'everydayness' – paradoxically understood as common yet unique – are part of the contemporary vocabulary of 'experience.' These are all 'culturalized expectations' in relation to experience. Abrahams succeeds in describing three features which are peculiarly tied up to Western cultural expectations of the phenomenon: first, 'experience' is the search for novelty, as it implies a fear of boredom. Second, to 'experience' means to 'move on' or 'move up.' Third, 'experience' should describe the 'authentic' and not the 'authoritative.'<sup>55</sup> At the end of his discussion, Abrahams recognizes two kinds of an experience: 'that arising directly out of the flow of life' and 'that for which we plan and to which we look forward.' The 'openness of experience' is constantly limited by the 'self-determination' of our daily lives. This is why, we may add, an analysis of 'experience' should ever be a continuous exercise in self-consciousness.

Having in mind these critical caveats about essential terms such as 'nature' and 'experience,' we may address several questions to Berleant's model of 'aesthetic social situations', questions which I drew from Brian Sutton-Smith's<sup>56</sup> critique of the phenomenological theories of play. The objections are valid in our case too, since they apply to any explanation that does not take into the account the particular, non-universal aspects of human situations which are, inevitably, anthropologically and psychologically diverse.

The objections would refer first to the broad feature of universality that Berleant seems to attach to his phrase and to the qualities which describe his 'aesthetic social situation': is the perception associated with Berleant's 'aesthetic social situation' universal across cultures? How can we know that everyone sees an 'aesthetic social situation' in the same manner? How can we know that the qualities that describe the 'aesthetic social situation' are seen in the same manner? Is there, as Sutton-Smith suggested about play, a 'neurological wiring' to assess an 'aesthetic social situation' in the same manner? Is it not that the aesthetic social situation is more likely attached to a 'value that can be learned by some' and *not* universal, just as in the case of play (Sutton-Smith)?

Secondly, there are practices which would not cope similarly with the qualities describing an aesthetic social situation. For example, work and play would seem to enjoy the same status in Berleant's theory, even if their grammars, according to psychology, are totally different.<sup>57</sup> Thus, can we ascribe the same quality to all the situations? Without forgetting one more objection: the fact that Berleant's taxonomy may be another victim of the difference and peculiarity of cultural coding, since it ascribes only a set of features to an otherwise culturally diverse concept: 'aesthetic social situation.'

Obviously enough, these critical assessments may also be addressed to our own environmental 'aesthetic situation' model, which we have drawn from Berleant's proposal. Thus, even if an

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<sup>53</sup> Abrahams, 'Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience', 48.

<sup>54</sup> Abrahams, 'Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience', 49.

<sup>55</sup> Id. *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Following Sutton-Smith.

environmental action may be perceived as a 'social aesthetic situation', it remains to be seen if the qualities ascribable to it are universalizable and if, ultimately, the environmental action-'aesthetic situation' itself is not culturally diverse as well. A theoretical proposal such as this will have to take into account all these aspects, especially the fact that 'environmental action' as well as 'social aesthetic situation' are concepts that may 'sign up' to different readings in different cultures. Ultimately, 'aesthetic situation' may describe certain qualities in our Western culture, different qualities in others. This may be also true about the qualities we ascribe to terms such as "environment", or "protest".

### VIII. Conclusion: Berleant's 'aesthetics of environment'

One of the most important theoretical contributions to an aesthetic of 'environment' is Berleant's *The Aesthetics of Environment* (1992).<sup>58</sup> The book sets the standard for more recent 'environmental' approaches to aesthetics. It makes clear right from the outset that he envisions his proposal more as an 'environmental' aesthetics than as an aesthetics of environment. He also makes use of 'environment' both as a language as well as a metalanguage. The metalinguistic use suggests, as he describes it, a 'paradigm' in aesthetics, where we could be able to shift from an 'aesthetics of disinterestedness' to a different kind of aesthetic approach. He explains the 'environmental' paradigm as a 'paradigm' of a new aesthetics, an 'aesthetics of engagement.'<sup>59</sup> He will develop this theme further in his 1993 *Art and Engagement*. He describes environment as 'suggesting a mutual participation of perceiver and object that is continuous with practical, cultural, and historical interests.'<sup>60</sup> Actually, he draws on the analogy between 'environment' as an ecological concept and 'environment' as an aesthetic paradigm: '[environment involves] a process of mutual interaction taking place between the organism and the multitude of factors that constitute its environmental setting.'<sup>61</sup> In aesthetics, this suggests a new 'setting' and a new approach to aesthetic object in an 'environmental' (mutually responsive) way. It also suggests the total commitment of the aesthetic perceiver to its object, thus challenging the basic anthropocentric assumptions of aesthetics. There is thus an 'aesthetic' environment as well as there is a biological environment for the human being. As we are not simple 'observers'<sup>62</sup> in nature (as environment), there is no simple 'observer' in aesthetics: we are all *involved* into the 'aesthetic' environment; as well as this 'aesthetic' environment cannot be at all simply excluded from its *own* environment of cultural, social environments. The findings of the book are very useful and appealing, especially when describing real cases of 'environmental' aesthetic experiences: architecture, participatory experience at the museum.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the critical caveats still apply: what Berleant so eloquently describes as interconnection between the human body, space and mind in architecture and museum aesthetics may be particular, but not classically universal to aesthetic approaches. At the end, Berleant is critically aware of the theoretical status of his findings. He speaks of an aesthetic attitude which would require 'aesthetic awareness', but of a kind different from the simple 'contemplation'. This awareness, Berleant argues, involves the aesthetic element as a 'universal category', yet 'not the universal category but the omnipresent concept of a pervasive feature of experience.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

<sup>59</sup> Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment*, 148.

<sup>60</sup> Id. *ibid.* 146.

<sup>61</sup> Id. *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Id. *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>63</sup> *Aesthetics of Environment*, 114-125; 145-159.

<sup>64</sup> Id. *ibid.*, 11.

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### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS –UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-1010.