

Home

Volume: Special Volume 11 (2024)

**The
Journal**

[Donate to CA](#)

**Call For
Papers**

The free access to this article was made possible by support from readers like you. Please consider donating any amount to help defray the cost of our operation.

**About
CA**

**Submiss
ions**

Toward a Sustainable Attitude: Aesthetics, the Arts, and the Environment

**Ethics
Stateme
nt**

Preface to the Special Issue 2024 of *Contemporary Aesthetics*

**Contact
CA**

**Editorial
Board**

Roberta Dreon & Diego Mantoan

**Subscrib
e**

This special issue of *Contemporary Aesthetics* aims to investigate the environmental challenges facing the world from a philosophical and artistic perspective, particularly to overcome the indeterminateness of the notion of sustainability and its multifaceted nature, which unfortunately falls prey to contrasting world views, as is evident in climate change skepticism. So far, the crisis has been addressed primarily with solutions based on technological innovation, rather than ones requiring significant shifts in attitudes and conceptual frameworks. The failure to inspire behavioral change through rigorous scientific communication has increasingly fostered interest in the relationship among aesthetics, art, and sustainability that offers new forms of knowledge production and human action that complement necessary legislative developments and shared international policies.

**Browse
Archive**

**Donate
to CA**

Search

Search ...

Search

The background to this issue lies in the problematic nature of concepts such as “world” and “environment,”

Search
h
Archiv
e

**Search
Archive**

Search

and in the opposition between “natural” and “cultural.” Considering how human transformations of the Earth system and the climate crisis definitely are challenging the culture/nature and natural sciences/humanities dichotomies, in addition to their underlying epistemological paradigms, this issue explores the theoretical and procedural implications of connecting aesthetics and art to sustainability. In particular, two aspects shall be explored: the first relates to the ways in which sustainability is perceived and understood in different cultural and social contexts; the second to the ways in which artists can contribute to the sustainability debate at an experiential and conceptual level.

The papers collected in this issue offer a privileged opportunity to reflect on the philosophical and artistic contribution to the discourse on sustainability and related practices, thus representing a favorable driver of behavioral change. They are the result of an international conference held at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Italy, in October 2022, that was conceived as a multidisciplinary event involving scholars from the entire spectrum of the humanities—ranging from philosophy to art history and from public humanities to environmental humanities.

-

We believe that a basic methodological claim is the distinguishing feature of the conference and of this special issue: our goal—or at least our attempt—is to complement rigorous research on some old and new concepts mainly drawn from the aesthetic tradition and still in use as theoretical tools for dealing with problems of sustainability, with a detailed analysis of existing artistic practices and contributions, insofar as they influence the behavior of individuals and communities in facing the current environmental crisis.

Both modes of inquiry should contribute to the development of a critical and proactive attitude toward sustainability that is robustly informed by empirical research and thoroughly supported by a more conscious use of conceptual tools and arguments.

-

The first group of contributions focuses on some key concepts in the field of environmental aesthetics and philosophy, from the very idea of sustainability and its various nuances to landscape and landscape beauty, aesthetic education, sensibility, disinterest, frugality, and waste. The general effort is to overcome the alleged

dualism between nature and culture and to consider that human actions are an integral part of the environment in its dynamic constitution, for the better but obviously also for the worse. Another outcome is a common though not always explicit tendency to emphasize the convergence between environmental aesthetics and ethics beyond the traditional claims to autonomy of each disciplinary field.

The second group of papers focuses on artistic contributions, thus analyzing the role of artists and public engagement in influencing the behavior of individuals and communities, particularly by shifting from representational forms of art to a participatory and processual paradigm. The papers in this category explore the ways in which artistic practice influences human behavior and affects widespread sensibilities, in view of an eco-aesthetic that counters extractivism. The result is a discussion of the growing sensibility or, better still, the emerging attitude toward the sustainable discourse that has informed contemporary art and artists over the last few decades, first on the fringes of the art system, both institutionally and geographically, and then even within the established art world.

Within the first section, Roberta Dreon's paper discusses whether aesthetic disinterestedness, generally considered a distinctive feature of aesthetic experience since Kant, still can play a pivotal role in developing an adequate idea of sensibility towards the environment. The issue is far from simple, given that on the one hand we should avoid forms of anthropocentrism in experiencing nature, and on the other hand we should carefully consider whether the very concept of sensibility, insofar as it characterizes organic beings whose lives are part of and depend on their environment, can abstract from any kind of situated interest.

Paolo Furia suggests recovering the concept of landscape in the context of environmental aesthetics by questioning the criticism it has received within the field for its apparent kinship with the subject-object opposition and the nature-culture dichotomy. Furia defends a substantive understanding of the concept of landscape and claims that the harmony we experience in enjoying landscape beauty at the same time involves a reference to ecological, sociopolitical, and aesthetic balances.

Alberto Siani explores the possibility of developing a specifically aesthetic education to landscape sensibility. By comparing the very concept of landscape with the notion of environment, he argues that at a fundamental level, the former already implies the interdependence

between a given space and a human subject. Building on Wittgenstein's idea of "*Abrichtung*," Siani claims that landscape education entails a radically transformative dimension and a practical commitment that, unlike environmental education, cannot be pursued through explanations, but must instead imply a form of enskilment.

Mădălina Diaconu challenges the philosophical interpretation of "traces" as meaningful sources for reconstructing the past by arguing that this view neglects their materiality, that is, that it is impossible to generate significant traces without producing waste as well. Rather, she contends that a future-oriented approach is necessary, one that engages communities in controlling the production and erasure of traces, thereby revaluing productivity and transience.

Elisabetta Di Stefano explores frugality as representing an alternative aesthetic category for developing a sustainable art of living. Through a multilayered exploration of the concept, she endorses an aesthetic of the ordinary grounded in a frugal lifestyle, whereby individuals can establish a harmonious and respectful relationship with the environment and promote a more sustainable future.

After exploring the different meanings of sustainability—from weak to mediating-critical to very strong—Kira Meyer and Konrad Ott focus on the "cultural services" that nature offers and that conform to eudaimonic values. Their approach attempts to intertwine eco-phenomenology with the philosophical theory of sustainability, and also to emphasize some basic convergences between environmental ethics and aesthetics.

The second section of this thematic issue opens with Peter Schneemann's reflection on the methodological implications and challenges for art history as a discipline when confronted with the "ecological imperative." His argument materializes how clear societal expectations about ecological questions, approaches, and attitudes imply a new rhetoric by artists that anticipates the need for an ethical stance. However, the shift toward notions like sustainability has been so rapid and radical that a deeper look at the ethical dimension now applied to artistic production as a marker of value urgently is needed.

Nicole Hall dives headfirst into the case study of Olafur Eliasson's Paris installation of *Ice Watch* (2014-2018), whose message has poignantly been perceived as a

reminder of global warming. Her paper argues that virtuous appreciation, judgment, and evaluation emerge, in some cases even of controversial artworks, when engaged for the right kinds of aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic reasons, even when one is left with a deep sadness or discomfort by the creation of the work—if accompanied by the right kinds of internally motivated reasons.

Diego Mantoan instead moves to the edge of the art world by considering the digital and public artwork, *Solar Protocol* (2020-ongoing), by Tega Brain, Alex Nathanson, and Benedetta Piantella. Their small-scale, participatory experiment consisting of a solar-powered server network stimulates a wider reflection on the interconnectedness of the economic, environmental, behavioral, and aesthetic features that shape the way the internet is produced and consumed. Firmly grounded in artistic grammar, *Solar Protocol* offers tangible proof of the internet's environmental impact, in addition to a participatory response that highlights the aesthetic and behavioral roots of the problem.

Finally, Vanessa Badagliacca presents the early works of Alicia Barney, a pioneer of environmental art in Colombia, highlighting her ability to lead towards a sustainable attitude within and beyond contemporary aesthetic debates. What emerges is an artist who attempts to adopt a detached, scientific attitude in which no emotional involvement seems to surface, although in reality she has enacted an aesthetics of minimal resources that still today invites the viewer to look inward and activate "affective ecologies" that encompass plant, animal, and human interactions.

We cannot but conclude with a series of due and heartfelt acknowledgments. First, we must stress the importance of the thorough fieldwork that preceded this issue that is not represented by the Venice conference alone. Indeed, over a period of eight years, we benefited from an ongoing program in art and sustainability at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, especially through the Sustainable Art Prize established by Sustainable Ca' Foscari at the ArtVerona art fair and the subsequent public art projects developed in Venice. We would also like to thank all the conference partners for their support and active participation that made our gathering a much-needed moment of debate: Jonathan Soffer for New York University Tandon, Peter Schneemann for the University of Bern, and Franz Fischer for the Venice Centre for Digital and Public Humanities. Last but not least, we

cannot but express our sincere gratitude to Yuriko Saito for welcoming us to *Contemporary Aesthetics*, thus providing our debate with an outstanding platform that resonates within the international scholarly community.

Roberta Dreon

robdre@unive.it

Roberta Dreon is an Associate Professor of Aesthetics at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy. She recently published *Human Landscapes. Contributions to a Pragmatist Anthropology* (SUNY, 2022), focusing on sensibility, habits, and human experience as enlanguaged. Among her further monographs, she published *Out of the Ivory Tower. The Inclusive Aesthetics of John Dewey, Today*, (Marietti: 2012 in Italian), which was translated into French by Questions Teoriques in 2017. Among her most recent articles, she worked on pragmatist aesthetics, pragmatism and enactivism, sensibility, and the theory of emotions, as well as papers on Dewey, Mead, and James. She is co-editor in chief of the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*.

Diego Mantoan

diego.mantoan@unipa.it

Diego Mantoan is a Faculty in Modern and Contemporary Art History at the University of Palermo, with a PhD Magna Cum Laude at FU Berlin, focussing his research on art theory and environmental art, as well as digital and public humanities. He published with Palgrave, Bloomsbury, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Heidelberg University Press, and Marsilio, further holding speeches at institutes such as Bibliotheca Hertziana, Sotheby's Institute of Art, University College London, New York University, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His book *The Road To Parnassus* (Vernon Press, 2015) was long listed at Berger Prize 2016, while he later edited with Luigi Perissinotto the interdisciplinary book *Palozzi and Wittgenstein: The Artist and the Philosopher* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019). He was director assistant and jury secretary at the Venice Biennale. Later he curated the archives of Douglas Gordon (Berlin), Sigmar Polke (Cologne) and Julia Stoschek (Düsseldorf). He collaborated with the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, ArtVerona and La Fenice Theatre. He is an author of documentary programs for the Italian and Swiss national broadcasting companies RAI and RTS.

Volume: Special Volume 11 (2024) | Author: Roberta Dreon, Diego Mantoan

[Publisher](#) | [Permission to Reprint](#) | [Links](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Donate](#)

The author retains copyright for the article.

Downloading, copying in whole or in part, and distribution for scholarly or educational purposes are encouraged,
provided full acknowledgement is made to *Contemporary Aesthetics* and to the authors of articles.

© 2024 *Contemporary Aesthetics*
ISSN 1932-8478