Chapter 12
Ethics and Aesthetics of Environmental Engagement

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Abstract Current theories of justice cannot account for the motives of a sustainable environment, that is, the material perpetuation of a fair society (one that regards all its citizens as equals), because it ignores the extent to which ethics integrates fundamental care, and more particularly, moral virtues. Care ensures the perpetuation of an existing environment and the attention paid to its particularity, often at a local level (Paperman and Laugier 2005). Individuals and communities shape and nurture nature, while working with nature through gardening can contribute to wellbeing. This chapter explores such relationships through case studies of urban community gardens in Russia and the Netherlands, and considers how an ethics of care and aesthetic engagement can be integrated into human-environment relations. In Tver, a town between Moscow and St Petersburg, a group of scientists who wanted to organize an Agenda 21 were asked to assist some inhabitants of a block of flats adjacent to an industrial area. They formed an Ecological Club, and the garden they created played a key role in improving their quality of life. In Arnhem, a city in eastern Holland, close to the German border, the investment in urban public space by the inhabitants was the result of the withdrawal from the district by the authorities. During the 1970s, the inhabitants decided to fight against the degradation of their life-world and embarked on a project of gardens to achieve their aim.

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Current theories of justice cannot account for the motives of a sustainable environment, that is, the material perpetuation of a fair society (one that regards all its...
citizens as equals) because it ignores the extent to which ethics integrates fundamental care, and more particularly moral virtues (for example, concern for automobile pollution). Care ensures the perpetuation of an existing environment and the attention paid to its particularity, often at a local level (Paperman and Laugier 2005). Furthermore, this concern for the 'local' is related to the idea of the global, which one's imagination can make fruitful.

Continuing this line of argument, how is it possible to characterize the relations between ethical and aesthetic engagement in public space? Approaching the question from the point of view of environmental care, which means taking care of individual being (people and any living being and sometimes even non-living things), we can say that ethics and aesthetics are two sides of the same coin; the side that comes uppermost will be decided upon by the course of action according to the understanding of those involved.

From the start, we need to define more precisely the terms which are being used. The term 'environment' makes it possible to refer to the multiple links a person or any living being forges in its relations with the world. This singular organization adapts to its environment, making processes of creative adjustment; these processes can be described as an active environmentalization. They bring into play multiple sensory links, and this confers a certain aesthetic meaning to the living environments, making it significant and opening up the possibility of aesthetic judgments, which in turn may give rise to public debate. This is a pluralist version of environmental engagement. By 'aesthetic engagement', we do not refer to a specialized field which would be art, or to the philosophy of beauty, or even to a theory of taste. One must think of an active environmental mode of knowledge which is not reserved for art or culture.

This mode of active knowledge follows the reflections of John Dewey (1934) or, more recently, Arnold Berleant (1992) for whom aesthetic experience is a way of registering the environment inside oneself, instead of being the subject of a passive and disengaged contemplation. This is the reason why, moreover, Berleant doesn't agree with Kant's idea of disinterested aesthetic judgment. The aesthetic experience is a mode of training and a mode of knowledge which puts the body and the spirit to the test in single movement. Some forms of environmental mobilization, such as plural mobilizations within an urban framework aiming at the requalification of places of life, can be analyzed in terms of aesthetic engagement. Indeed, the categories mobilized (landscape, living space, ordinary patrimony, the beauty of gardens and floral spaces) to justify the movements, as well as the actors taking part in them (artists, landscape planners, etc.) are evidence of this.

In addition, these mobilizations testify to the plurality of significant and everyday links which give meaning to the environment. They give a role to images and imaginary compositions of places and an idea of what they should be, including directions on how to inhabit them, thus accounting for the environment in all its richness. The role of beliefs and emotions (including that of injustice), and that of the fictions that enable us to live together on a daily basis, should not be forgotten. Finally, by public space, we also designate the concrete formal space accessible to the public, as well as the virtual space of dialogue which indicates political debate. Public space is the political construction of a common world through debate and dialogue, but it is also a concrete reality, inasmuch as it is a living space. However, today, in the context of environmental complexity, public space is no longer simply the space of debate; it has become what's at stake in the debate. The environment as a social question, but also the natural and constructed environment, is turned into a tangible, shared and public space which brings forth a debate. Such a space is already contained in the law and contained in the public policies of landscape. Now that we have set the terms of the debate let us specify the places of ecological engagement.

We will proceed through three distinct steps: first, we will consider the extent to which the conceptual design of the environment is renewed by new media; a design which must include the ideas of both proximity and distance; secondly, we will discuss the question of environmental ethics in light of the concept of an ethics of care, as it has recently been developed in France by Patricia Paperman and Sandra Laugier (2005). A Russian example will show how the desire for a better life is guided by aesthetic judgment and experience.

Finally, we will discuss how such an approach upsets aesthetic prejudices. We will begin by pointing out the links between ethics and aesthetics, then how ethics based on self-knowledge goes hand in hand with an experience of the forms of life. A Dutch example will show how far this collective desire can accompany an urban transformation. In these cases, local and civil action is not politically instrumented: in Russia, the local state has given up management of the place; in the Netherlands, the inhabitants are allowed to invest themselves in local transformations.

### 12.1 An Environmental Conceptual Design Between Proximity and Distance

When Jacques Rancière (2000) speaks of 'sharing a sensitive world', he refers to the equal capacity of all members of a given society to decide what value to confer to things, which are, in the environmental context, living and acting forces. Indeed, environmental problems endowed with an undeniable social effect are producing public policies and actions. One could even say that the emergence of environmental problems strongly contributes to legitimating civil society. Let us go further and ask: What did the environmental question produce in terms of new public objects?

Climate change, the development of all kinds of pollution, and its effects on health were addressed in autonomous fields of research independently of their social construction. The first stage of environmental issues in the 1970s, of sustainable development, focused on the ecological dimension of the relationship 'nature/society'. This was mainly a question of ensuring that the spatial concentration and the activities of human populations do not further impact the environment, the latter being conceived on a strictly 'material' level (ecosystems, including landscapes, atmosphere, water, etc.) and analyzed in terms of the natural sciences which study the
environment according to its various facets (ecology, physics, chemistry and their various combinations according to the studied objects). One can speak of an ‘objective’ approach to the environment. However, the environment cannot be reduced to its objective dimension.

What role does aesthetics play in the definition and co-construction of a new public space which incorporates new objects, those speaking to the senses and affect? What role can aesthetics play to overcome the neglect of significant ordinary links to the environment? Precisely, its role is to initiate and inform public discussion concerning a new ‘shared sensibility’, implying both sense perception and sensible ‘behaviour’. What creates such ‘sensibility’ over and above what is collectively defined as ‘sensible’ are difficult neighbourhoods, fragile or irremediably corrupted environments, endangered species, and so on.

However, we should specify why we think that local space, which integrates references to more remote spaces, is to us a particular space of investment. Public discussion is necessary, inasmuch as it relates to the objects as objects endowed with a material and social nature, that is to say, as objects that are the products of interactions between nature and society. This public space of proximity is one thread of the knot which constitutes the construction of an environmental conscience. In our virtual world, it remains necessary to construct and enrich the discussion by making precise reference to specific places of dwelling, of life. These living environments give to each of us the possibility of forging means of acting, of building a representation of the world – which pushes us to work out a point of view on the environment, its necessary safeguarding as well as the means of adapting it to ecological upheavals in a creative way.

Thus if we want aesthetic debate and the question of creativity to reach beyond the field of art, we are compelled to produce a new horizon of action: environmental aesthetics is a field where one can sketch a role for aesthetics in policy-making.

Why are we concerned about our local environments? Aesthetic discussion opens up a space in which to construct an imaginative framework of reference, a representation of the significant space in which we live and also to which we aspire. It is a question of being equipped with tools which do not reduce human societies to a mass subjected to the predicted catastrophe of climate change. It is a question of inventing the means of working out answers which do not consist only of forced adaptation to an endangered ecology, but which also represent nature in new ways and thereby suggest new forms of collective action.

Such a concept of local action is necessarily linked to a concept of global action: the local is not simply a question of geography, of a more or less measurable space associated with a given group or society, it is also a question of the multiplicity of emotions and relational networks that the local environment engenders. Indeed, it is necessary to revise the question of the local: we should make a place for new means of communication, but also for the imagination. They both transform distant relationships into close ones; they permit us to include remote places in our hearts and to care for them. They are made of all these picturesque accounts that one gives oneself, and contribute to the texture of the place we live in. Seen in this way, fiction helps to reconsider the how and the where of our experience of life and is thus special in terms of activity.

If we want to try to account for the various types of relationship between proximity and distance, the local and the global, we must take aesthetics into account. The local is what we think of as a relation of proximity and what we hold to be ours.

### 12.2 A Different Model of Ethics

We will conceive of ethics in terms that differ from those conventionally used. A strict definition of ethics would consider it as only a principle of self-regulation of self-knowledge. As Agamben explains, ethics is the sphere which knows neither fault nor responsibility, it is the doctrine of the happy life, ‘To recognize a fault and a responsibility amounts to leaving the sphere of ethics in order to penetrate into that of the law’ (Agamben 2003: 25). How could this lived ethics, conceived as the self-realization of the individual, touch on concern for the environment? The Kantian universalist concept of morals or the utilitarianism of Mill are among the two principal traditions in moral philosophy. Kantian moral theory argues that moral commands must take the form of universal and applicable laws (i.e., laws that apply to any rational being placed in a similar situation) independently of the individual characteristics (such as desires or interests) that motivate a given action. Classical utilitarian ethics postulates that the only common point among people is their aspiration to happiness: the hedonist principle. Both of these moral theories begin with the fact that human beings share the same principle of reason or the same capacities and desires for pleasure. The former recommends considering ourselves and our particularities in the abstract; the latter finds its approach on the relation of self-interest which controls individuals. Recent work in ethics renews the debate in an interesting way with an ‘ethics of care’, and thus an ethics based on feelings of ‘care’, and more particularly on the concerns of close relationships and proximity, an attention focused on the singular. For example, according to Ambroise,

Carol Gilligan identifies three fundamental characteristics differentiating ethics of care from an ethics of justice. First, the ethics of care is articulated around moral concepts different from the ethics of justice, namely, human responsibility and its connections rather than rules and the law. Second, this form of morals is related to concrete circumstances and is not formal and abstract. Third, this form of morals is better expressed not as a set of principles and rules but as an activity and a practice, ‘the activity of care’. Thus, according to Gilligan’s ‘different voice’, morals are not founded on abstract and universal principles, but in the experiences and moral problems that ordinary people meet in daily life. In short, the central moral principle consists of ‘care’, in not harming others and avoiding selfishness (Ambroise 2005: 264).

Our recent research studying the individual’s investment in their lifeworlds shows the extent to which such a concept of ethics may resonate with environmental
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are used to remake the bases of buildings has led to a progressive assumption of responsibility by the inhabitants, of care for the communal parts and the external spaces, a responsibility that had been abandoned by the housing office. The initial plan consisted of the creation of a garden in 2001; a playground and other games for children were realized and repair of the staircases carried out. This project concerns an extremely degraded environment whose abandonment by the authorities obliged the inhabitants to take over. The project comprises mostly women, although some children and teenagers are also involved. It employs the vice-director of the school, as well as a few of the owner-occupiers of the residences, although the wages offered are relatively small. It is also necessary to note the important role given to such aspects as garden internal and external decoration. Certain inhabitants carve wooden statues which come to ornament the gardens, as in the parks of large cities. This contributes to the construction of a collective heritage, which may have a significant impact on visitors (among whom we count the researchers) (Stavo-Debaige and Trom 2004). This case study shows the importance of the argument of beauty in the improvement of one's local habitat. It is a space designed like a natural environment. The scientists and the local ecologists present on the spot understood that their interests coincided with those of the inhabitants. For all, the stake was to plant local species in order to improve urban public space. For the scientists and the Ecological Club, it was a quest for contributing to local biodiversity; for the city dwellers, to find nature in their daily living space. What is demonstrated here is the problem of facing up to environmental degradation as it is represented and objectified on a scientific level in the name of a better life, which involves the enhancement of an area and, more generally, an appreciation of the beauty of nature. Taking into account the beauty of nature as an important part of concern for environmental preservation in our period of global networks may be a way of developing the concept of care and attention to what surrounds us. This is a principle of justice which must be extended and associated with the responsibility that it creates. It is important to show that non-assistance for an endangered environment may influence individual behaviour. Indeed, the impact of human activity on the environment narrows the possible field of individual and collective adaptation. Creating awareness of this relation amounts to emphasizing the feeling of responsibility towards the environment as a form of responsibility for the future.

12.4 Ethics and Aesthetics with Respect to the Environment

Thus the aesthetic may be seen as a mode of knowledge and transmission of what is right in the environment, allowing the best kind of adaptation or recognition of the values shared by individuals and the collective. It can define the way in which we justify the irreplaceable quality of our environments: the idea of a heritage associated with a landscape, the modes of asserting the identity of a place—these are ways of accounting for a natural and singular irreducibility. Disorder and damage in the environment provides the occasion for these values to appear. Consequently, the aesthetics of the environment is not just the recognition of an aesthetized appearance, that is to say, qualities which make it possible to describe the beauty or the ugliness of a place. Nor is it simply a method of knowing a place. It is, more precisely, the domain where taste is formed, where taste can then be shared and communicated. It could be described as the process of learning about a shared environment, based on habitability in constant negotiation. Defined thus, aesthetic judgment is taken into a course of action, in contradistinction to other types of judgment. It is knowledge acquired through action and not derived from an overarching point of view. As Kant (2000) wrote in 1790, the experience of the fine arts, by which humanity acquires some capacity to communicate on a very intimate but also on a universal level, can teach people to live together. Further on, after having indicated that people governed by the law develop an aesthetic sense from the reciprocal exchange of ideas about the judgment of taste, Kant insists on the fact that the future, which will move away from nature, obliges us to go in this direction, since it will be necessary for people to learn how to evaluate their action by joining together ‘legal constraints required by the highest culture with the force and the accuracy of free nature feeling its own value’ (1995: 344). Obviously such a development implies, as Kant adds, the development of moral judgment, since taste is strongly dependent on it. In what way? Refining our taste is also an opening in terms of spiritual and moral elevation. Ultimately, it is not simply a question of moral duty, which may be contradictory to the spirit of happiness, but of self-knowledge, and of one’s inclinations, which lead to happiness. Indeed, the exact idea of such happiness corresponds to that of the moral sense, which is the horizon of happiness (if any happiness) when one thinks of the relations between causes and effects in a given society.

What we will show now is that giving shape to a district via gardens and the activity of gardening and, overall, placing it in relation to a certain urban landscape, is accompanied by an ethical will which corresponds to the specific idea of a happy life in a given place and urban context. Such a space comes into being gradually: the possibility of action engendered in the course of and due to environmental action creates new horizons incrementally. In Arnhem, a city in eastern Holland, close to the German border, the investment in urban public space by the inhabitants was the result of the withdrawal from the district by the authorities. During the 1970s, the inhabitants decided to fight against the degradation of their lifeworld and decided on a project of gardens in order to achieve their aim. During this period, one of the inhabitants (Gerda Van Steijn, who looks after one of the gardens today) decided to make use of large flower pots on balconies and to invite other inhabitants of this district to plant flowers in them: ‘they do not want bad people to invade their district’ (Discussion with Loet Van Moll, 17/06/2007). According to the story now told by one of the principal actors in the history of these gardens, the epic of this laudress gave the impetus to what constitutes, in a structured and visible way in terms of urban space, the organization by the ‘Groengroep’ of eleven gardens in a district which mixes

The impact of the Internet on the organization of work and the workplace.

The rise of the Internet has had a profound impact on the way we work and the way we organize our workplaces. The Internet has transformed the way we communicate, collaborate, and access information, and has led to the development of new work practices and organizational structures.

1. Communication and collaboration: The Internet has made it easier for people to communicate and collaborate, even if they are located in different parts of the world. This has led to the development of new forms of communication, such as instant messaging and video conferencing, and has made it easier for people to work together on projects.

2. Access to information: The Internet has made it easier for people to access information, which has led to a greater emphasis on knowledge and information management. This has led to the development of new work practices, such as the use of knowledge management systems, and has made it easier for people to find the information they need.

3. Work organization: The Internet has led to the development of new forms of organizational structures, such as the flat organization, which is characterized by a lack of hierarchical structure and a focus on teamwork and collaboration.

4. Remote work: The Internet has made it possible for people to work from home or other remote locations, which has led to a greater emphasis on the ability to work flexibly and remotely.

5. Self-service and customer support: The Internet has made it easier for customers to access information and support, which has led to a greater emphasis on self-service and customer support.

The Internet has had a profound impact on the way we work and the way we organize our workplaces, and it is likely to continue to shape the way we work in the future.
The investment of these spaces is incontestably aesthetic where the initial motivation for building them is concerned, but also in terms of the spectacle presented to city dwellers. The gardens are discrete decorations, built into the urban fabric, of rich scenes and situations, but this is also an ethical investment which corresponds to the hope of a better life in the various meanings of the term: collective and individual. Form guides the action in this project designed to lead to a better life.

It is important to encourage the aesthetic participation of the inhabitants, but it is just as important to enrich the social and environmental analysis of a different aspect, that is, sensitivity to the environment. It is indeed urgent to develop a true art of the environment which engages aesthetics and ethics. If it is true that the sense of the word environment is more complete when its aesthetic dimensions are taken into account, then art, in so far as it may be said to constitute the avant-garde of future perception and representation, can contribute to that reflection: the environment is an art, an eminently social art, collective art, the art of the fabric of life. It is the responsibility of all, and not only of women, who often manage local environments,* to develop a constructive relation to the environment. And that requires a quite particular kind of teaching, because the judgment of taste is the art of learning how to judge by oneself. We live in a period where we can observe the 'failure' of political dogmas, and thus we are required to develop new vectors of autonomy. Seen in this way, urban art is autonomy; being detached from nature implies having to learn about oneself.

References


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*K It should be noted that feminist theories within the ethics of care can be partly addressed by drawing on French political ecology. This refusal to be interrogated relates in particular to researchers in the social sciences concerned with empirical work, where the great presence of women is found in the management of proximity of the environment.*