Martin Drenthen and Jozef Keulartz (Eds.)


This impressive volume has satisfied the purpose put forth by the editors: to show how the field of environmental aesthetics has both come of age and diversified in recent decades. At first glance, several of the articles can seem distinct and unrelated, but a longer look will reveal an interdisciplinarity that is both maturing and deepening. Those of us who come to the study of ecology from fields other than aesthetics will find a delightful new set of conversation partners. While no single definition of beauty is offered throughout the volume, each entry contributes to a common insight throughout the book, namely that beauty can illumine both the ethical questions of the environmental crisis and their potential solutions. Given this insight, all readers will find themselves called to be practitioners of beauty in their relative fields.

The first part serves as a helpful primer in the development of the field, from its art-centered origin to a much broader study of world-making, and then opens the door to future directions in scholarship. Part One argues for the need to look beyond Western sources and to favor cultural historicism over universalism. The second part explores the rethinking of relationships, questioning Kant’s aesthete, the disinterested observer, in favor of an “aesthetics of engagement,” an impulse that wisely makes room for ethical considerations in an ecological age. The third section on nature, art, and the power of imagination returns to the field’s roots in art, no longer perceived as disinterested in ethics. Art has the power to open us to new modes of both dwelling and deliberating that are not only less environmentally destructive but also empowering. The fourth part moves to the particular, from wind farms to shopping malls and wild animals, applying the tools of the discipline to the consideration of local intersections and oversights. This is arguably a sign of a now mature field of study, one that can move from the development of larger theoretical issues to their application in the realm of the local and the particular.

The importance of this volume lies in both its scope and successful argument. As the editors suggest, the diverse articles indeed show the many ways in which the discipline now crosses significant divides, namely analytic and continental philosophical traditions, Eastern and Western worldviews, aesthetics and ethics, universalizing and historicizing understandings of aesthetic experience, and theoretical and practical concerns. And like any discipline in its maturity, the work of individual scholars can, at first glance, seem unrelated in their level of specialization. The design of this volume defends their connect-
edness and shows clearly that the progression of the discipline is such that the field is now broad enough to contain everything from architecture and environmental art to a continuation of academic philosophical research and theory. There is room for fine art and shopping malls, and there is a mandate to work for the good of environmental healing.

While each of the chapters advances the purpose of the volume, perhaps the most significant contribution comes from Yrjö Sepänmaa in the article, “From Theoretical to Applied Environmental Aesthetics: Academic Aesthetics Meets Real-World Demands.” Sepänmaa issues a directive to those active in the field of environmental aesthetics to a new professional aesthetic activity and engagement with the public. Be analysts and guides, the call demands, experts in beauty working with other fields and practitioners. Aesthetic scholarship has a moral obligation to both the academy and to beauty on the ground, perhaps newly understood. This is a profoundly hopeful image. If beauty will have any role in saving the world in an ecological age, it will need the efforts of both theorists and practitioners of beauty, those who understand deeply the inner workings of beauty and its healing effects. Sepänmaa’s call highlights the moral imperatives of the field of environmental aesthetics and offers its admirers hope through the informed work of beauty on the ground.

Solving environmental threats and disasters and now global climate change is what Thomas Berry has called the Great Work facing humankind. Never before in our history have we faced such a complex challenge, the solution to which requires engagement by every kind of human ingenuity and creativity. The field of environmental aesthetics is clearly doing its work diligently toward our common endeavor. One small piece of this great work is answering what a group of scientists, themselves avowed atheists who share a sense of awe of the natural world, called a spiritual crisis in an open letter to the religious community in 1990. Humankind, they said, has careened down a destructive road based on a falsely perceived disconnection with our world. If there is a critical analysis to be made of this volume, it would be a gracious mention of an absent conversation partner, namely theological aesthetics. Theological aesthetics takes Alexander Baumgarten’s eighteenth century definition of aesthetics as the philosophy and science of the beautiful, or the science of sensory cognition, and recasts it into theological terms, looking at the science of what moves the human heart. A theological aesthetics suggests that there is a religious aspect to the experience of the beautiful that is revelatory and redemptive. As theological aesthetics and ecological theology grow in conversation, so too should they be invited into the development of environmental aesthetics. Perhaps with combined wisdom, the power of the aesthetic, which contributor Yuriko Saito argues aestheticians need to recognize, would be more fully