

Public Art and the Meaning of Landscapes

Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between artworks and landscapes. By considering *Chiesa all'aperto*—a public artwork by Italian artist Pino Castagna—I argue that artworks and landscapes are not essentially different things as held by environmental aesthetics. On the contrary, they are entities of a similar kind. Their similarity though does not depend on both of them possessing formal aesthetic properties, instead on their capacity of being culturally significant.

§1. Introduction

How should we appreciate and interpret a landscape? This is one of the main philosophical questions concerning our relationship with environments. By criticizing formalist approaches to nature appreciation, cognitivism in environmental aesthetics, which is the critical focus of this paper, proposes provocative answers to that question. For formalists, the appreciation and interpretation of landscapes are similar to those of artworks. They depend mainly on attending specific sensuous properties—often defined as *formal aesthetic properties*—such as “being red,” “being rectangular,” “possessing unity,” etc. On the contrary, cognitivists deny such similarity. Formal aesthetic properties are, or should *not* be, the focus when appreciating and interpreting landscapes. In their view, properties that are not formal—such as historical and ethical properties—may very well be more relevant than formal ones. In this paper, I argue that, though pointing towards an interesting direction, cognitivism in environmental aesthetics misunderstands the relationship between artworks and landscapes. There is no principled disjunction between

the appreciation and interpretation of artworks and those of landscapes. Noticeably, my thesis does not rest on formalist grounds. The appreciation and interpretation of landscapes are *not* similar to those of artworks because they both depend on attending formal aesthetic properties. The contrary claim is true. They are similar because formal aesthetic properties often should *not* be the focus of the appreciation and interpretation of artworks. Often, appreciating and interpreting artworks—like landscapes—requires focusing on many different kinds of properties other than formal aesthetic properties. Only by considering those properties, we can fully appreciate their cultural significance.

§2. Reconsidering Nature's Appreciation

Within contemporary debate on the philosophy of art, themes related to our appreciation and interpretation of nature have received much consideration. This area of study—commonly labeled as *environmental aesthetics*—emerges both as a theoretical reaction to twentieth-century philosophical aesthetics' exclusive focus on art, and as a practical aspiration to help preserving nature's aesthetic dimension in a period of ecological crisis.¹ Cognitivism is a major strand in environmental aesthetics. *Contra* formalism, it holds that sensuous properties are not the focus of nature appreciation. In cognitivists' view, appreciating nature depends on attending properties far removed from the sensuous domain.² Historically, cognitivism draws on eighteenth-century landscape aesthetics, though with important qualifications. As initial qualification, eighteenth-century landscape aestheticians confine the appreciation of nature to that of *pristine nature*, that is, nature in its state prior to human intervention. On their part, cognitivists characterize more generously those objects of appreciation. They argue that we do not merely appreciate naturally pristine sceneries, but also the world at large, including its more mundane vicinities such as: the majesty of a city skyline, the liveliness of a park on a warm afternoon, and the organized chaos in a busy marketplace. Correctly, cognitivists argue that we appreciate not only the natural world, but also environments, territories, and man-made settings such as gardens and cities.³ Call those objects of appreciation *landscapes*.

As a further qualification, eighteenth-century landscape aesthetic understands appreciation and interpretation of nature in terms of the concepts of the picturesque and the sublime. Thus, from that point of view, appreciation and interpretation of nature are analogous to canonical models for aesthetic appreciation and interpretation of art. Cognitivism in environmental aesthetics strongly disagrees with that view. For cognitivists, the appreciation and interpretation of landscapes differ profoundly from those of artworks. Primarily, such contrast rests on ontological and phenomenological differences. In their view, artworks and landscapes are ontologically distinct for two main reasons: first, paradigmatic artworks are more or less discrete, stable, and self-contained physical objects or events. We can discern and list their properties almost exhaustively. For instance, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* consists of an oil-painted canvas, occupying a determinate spatiotemporal position. It measures 172.5 cm x 278.5 cm. At its center, it presents a young naked woman, traditionally identified with Venus. The list of properties could go on describing the painting in its minutest details. On the contrary, landscapes change through time and, by expanding indefinitely in each direction, have no exact boundaries. Consider, for instance, New York City's skyline: where does it begin or end? How could I possibly describe its outline, once I acknowledge how quickly it changes? As a consequence of their *not* being discrete and stable objects, landscapes' properties are in flux, thus—at least in principle—being inclined to change, even dramatically. Of course, their list must be provisional.

Second (perhaps the deepest difference between artworks and landscapes), artworks are products of artists. Artists intentionally design and (often) realize their works. Artworks relate to artists' intentions not only causally, but also conceptually. By working within specific traditions, artists inform their artistic products with, among others, historical, generic, and stylistic properties. Consider, for instance, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. Of course, we recognize the lines, the colors, the arrangements of figures on the canvas as all intentional choices by its author. The physical realization of the work is surely an outcome of Picasso's (extraordinary) painting skills. Also, Picasso's artistic choices impart to his work stylistic properties linking the painting both to Western mod-

ernism and traditional African art.⁴ On the contrary, landscapes are not the product of intentional designers. They emerge “spontaneously,” as outcomes of natural processes or of human actions lacking an overall explicit design. Think about the Apuan Alps, where the Carrara marble quarries are found. The outline of the mountains—which is a complex output of natural orogenic and erosive processes interacting with extractive human activities—cannot be considered as the product of the design of any of the forces (both natural and artificial) concurring to its formation.

From a phenomenological point of view, cognitivists in environmental aesthetics argue that artworks and landscapes differ for two reasons. First, artworks are objects or events that we can engage *properly* just from specific distances and points of view. For instance, we should look at Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* from an appropriate distance, which allow us to notice at the same time both its overall *Gestalt* and its main details. In addition to that, the direction of our view should be perpendicular to the flat surface of the canvas. When considering music, we know that optimal musical listening requires being at a suitable distance from the sounding sources (for instance, few millimeters for headphones, few dozen of meters for rock-concert loud speakers). Moreover, we know that we should occupy a particular portion of the inside angle of the sound projection cone. If we move too far from the inside angle, the music will become inaudible or partially conveyed. For instance, in order to listen optimally to Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Kimmel Centre, I should be sitting on one of the middle rows of the main floor, while occupying the inside angle of the sound projection cone, where instruments’ volume are best balanced—plausibly, close to the centre of the main floor. Otherwise, the quality of my hearing might be seriously compromised. However, for cognitivists in environmental aesthetics, there are *no* such limitations when perceptually engaging landscapes. There is no optimal distance or position for experiencing landscapes. Moreover, we perceptually engage landscapes “from within,” while being immersed in them. Consider the *Boboli Gardens* in Florence. It seems that whenever we perceptually engage those gardens, we occupy a proper position, which is also a part of that landscape (or of a larger one including those gardens). Of course, we can engage them from different

distances and spatial locations: perhaps, from their main entrance, or from the *Isolotto*. However, no point of view is more legitimate than others.

Second, artworks come in different media, whose perception requires the use of specific senses. For instance, we perceive paintings (and other works of visual arts) by means of sight, while musical works are mainly perceived through hearing. For instance, it seems that I engage perceptually Caravaggio's *Lute Player* when I see it. Similarly, a perceptual experience of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* is primarily an experience of properties of sound. However, for environmental aesthetics, landscapes' complex structure elicits multi-sensory responses. Landscapes are not merely seen or heard: we engage them with the full spectrum of the five senses. We see, for instance, the contour and the colors of the *Langhe Hills*: we are immersed in their sounds (a river roaring, birds singing, agricultural machines operating); we touch their surfaces (the rough ground, the irregular cortex of trees, the hard and slippery ice on a cold night); we sense their smells (the grass after the rain, the blooming flowers in spring, the must boiling in the fall); we can taste, for instance, its grapes and truffles. A satisfactory perceptual grasp of the *Langhe Hills* should include at least some of those experiences (if not all). As a consequence, cognitivists in environmental aesthetics describe the experience of a landscape as somewhat totalizing—even “engulfing.”

By considering landscapes' ontological and phenomenological peculiarities, cognitivism in environmental aesthetics characterizes the appreciation and interpretation of landscapes as follows. In terms of appreciation—which is the ability of successfully engaging an external object or event, while grasping its good qualities⁵—, landscapes do not merely present themselves in a specific perceptual field, but they spatially absorb appreciators, eliciting all their senses. Noticeably, by lacking both an intentional design and a recognizable style, genre, and historical trend, the appreciation of landscapes is not influenced by traditional conditioners in art, such as knowledge of art history or artistic categories.⁶ By the same token, when we consider interpretation—which is the final outcome of a reflective understanding of the meaning(s) of an object or event⁷—, interpretations of landscapes cannot be construed, constrained, and warranted in terms

of art historical, stylistic, generic, and intentional criticism.

Cognitivists in environmental aesthetics argue that the appreciation and interpretation of landscapes should be respectively guided and warranted by a different conditioner, namely the nature itself of the object attended. In this sense, a knowledge of landscapes' history, type, and properties is essential for guiding their appreciation and warrant their interpretation. For instance, when considering the marble quarries of the Apuan Alps, the knowledge of the history of the extractive activity, of its relevance for the local community, and of its methods of production are helpful as frames for guiding our appreciation and for warranting our interpretation. As Allen Carlson writes: "Such knowledge encourages us to enlarge and adjust our frames, our senses, and even our attitudes, so as to more appreciatively accommodate the expansive uniform landscapes that are the inevitable result of such [extractive] practices."⁸

3. Castagna's *Chiesa all'aperto*: landscape or artwork?

Cognitivism in environmental aesthetics is surely one the most interesting trajectories in contemporary aesthetics. It correctly emphasizes that landscapes are possible sources of value, thus being worth of serious consideration. I also agree with the cognitivist idea that the appreciation and interpretation of landscapes require more than attending formal aesthetic properties. However, cognitivists seem to seriously misunderstand the relationship between artworks and landscapes not only in terms of appreciation and interpretation, but also at an ontological and phenomenological level. I argue that landscapes and artworks are not as different as suggested by cognitivists. Consider, for instance, *Chiesa all'aperto* (*Outdoor Church*), a public artwork realized by Italian contemporary sculptor Pino Castagna between 1988 and 1994, installed in Zermeghedo, a small town near Vicenza.

Chiesa all'aperto occupies a portion of the hill where Zermeghedo's original church—a traditional concrete structure—is built. The local clerical administration asked Castagna to redevelop the area outside the church, which consisted of an unappealing and useless muddy open space. Noticeably, patrons asked Castagna to install something that not only

was in continuity with the holiness of the location, but also was appealing to people of diverse religions. In effect, many leather factories operate in the vicinities of Zermeghedo, and many workers are immigrants from India, Eastern Europe, Africa, and South-East Asia.⁹ Patrons saw the redevelopment of that area as an opportunity for promoting integration between locals and immigrants. Castagna intended to realize a place of spiritual and physical encounter, pervaded by a silent sense of devotion. He opted, then, for an outdoor church with peculiar characteristics mitigating the distinctively Christian atmosphere created by a church.

A concrete steel wall decorated by a monumental cross in stainless and Corten steel constitutes the altar piece, which is the main sculptural element of the work. The altar piece orients the overall space, at the same time both delimiting a mystical niche and suggesting to the eye the openness of the space. The silhouette of the cross emerges as the negative space left between four kites of Corten steel, mounted on a surface of stainless steel. At night, light bulbs placed behind the kites illuminate the cross from within, producing a visual image of an ethereal and transcendent quality. The cross is oddly shaped: the transverse bar is longer than the post. Thus, the cross does not resemble any traditional Christian cross—for instance, neither Latin nor Greek. Such peculiarity is intended: it abstracts—at least in part—the cross from its immediate Christian reference. More importantly, the four kites bend outward towards the centre of the altar piece, in a movement that mimics and represents a projecting “hug.” The cross opens up to the world, welcoming and holding each pilgrim, in spite of her faith.

In front of the altar piece, we find an altar in natural stone. The flat top is in local red raw marble from Chiampo (a variation of red Asiago marble), which also paves the raised platform where the altar stays and part of the whole location. The flat top in marble lays over an erratic rock in dark granite, which Castagna found in a nearby creek. By surrounding the erratic rock, a series of light colored and small river rocks complete the altar. Right next to the altar, we find the baptismal font, carved in the same red raw marble from Chiampo.

On one side, the altar opens towards the valley, while on the other it touches the

mountain, which is contained by a dry wall built with local black granite, in the shape of small cubical rocks. Between the altar and the dry wall, a small staircase in Asiago red marble leads to the priest's apartments. While facing the altarpiece, we can see a construction—originally a school. On the opposite side, the work expands towards the church entrance. The two—the church and Castagna's work—conflate where another Asiago red marble staircase designed by Casagna leads the way inside the church. Between the dry wall and the church, another staircase opens: it takes to the church's tower, which is also the top of the hill. The first 15 steps are in Asiago red marble. Castagna intended the rest (circa 35 steps) to be coated with a different marble. However, he was unable to complete his work, which would have interested also the priest's apartments. The steps have a peculiar design, suggested to the author by functional considerations. A small drain directing the the rain flow separates each step. At the top of the staircase, a small paved surface allow for viewing the hills in the surrounding. A smaller sculpture by another artist completes the scene we can observe.

Perhaps, attentive readers already realized that Castagna's *Chiesa all'aperto*—like many other public artworks, though perhaps more explicitly than others—challenges *prima facie* the distinction between landscapes and artworks as characterized by environmental aesthetics. To begin with, *Chiesa all'aperto* seems to share with landscapes two relevant ontological features. First, Castagna's work is not a stable, discrete, or self-contained object as artworks supposedly are: its boundaries are undetermined and open. It expands in all directions and it is not clear where it begins or ends. It blurs into the church and the surroundings, thus creating a “tissuey” entity. Second, we cannot reduce *Chiesa all'aperto*'s identity to Castagna's intentional design: that reduction would overlook the genesis of the work, which: (i) emerges from a natural and human-made spatial arrangement preexisting Castagna's design; (ii) is still “unfinished” and may expand following different trajectories, many of those being unforeseen by Castagna (think about the work by the other artist); and, (iii) changes accordingly with the natural succession of seasons: colors of the local flora—incapsulated within the work—and the natural light differ radically throughout the year.

We can notice distinctive similarities between *Chiesa all'aperto* and landscapes at a phenomenological level, too. There is no proper distance or point of view from which we should engage the work. Like a landscape, appreciators engage *Chiesa all'aperto* “from within”: once you can experience the work, you already occupy a portion of its space. Moreover, *Chiesa all'aperto* elicits pertinently all of our senses—or at least most of them—, engendering that “engulfing” experience typical of landscapes. Of course, we engage visually the work. However, we can also touch it, as the rough borders of the kites invite us to do. We surely sent the smells of Zermeghedo: its trees, its grass, perhaps the foul of the leather factories. We perceive the mystical silence inhabiting the location. Noticeably, Castagna designed *Chiesa all'aperto* as a venue for music performances, thus explicitly emphasizing its sounding dimension.¹⁰

The similarities between *Chiesa all'aperto*—as well as many other artworks—and landscapes suggest something relevant. Rather than being essentially different, landscapes and artworks are entities of similar kind. We can imagine landscapes and artworks placed on a ideal continuum between two extremes. On one extreme, we find landscape of pristine natures: unstable, with uncertain borders, in a state of permanent change, devoid of an intentional design. On the other, we find artworks such as easel paintings or indoor small sized sculptures: discrete and self-contained objects, products of an explicit intentional design. Thus, the distinctions between artworks and landscapes drawn by environmental aestheticians capture the differences between specimen at the two extremes of the continuum. However, those same differences do not distinguish intermediate cases. There are surely artworks that are not stable and discrete objects, whereas we can think of landscapes—for instance, a Japanese indoor garden—that actually are, at least to some degree. In this sense, we may draw a radical conclusion: there may very well be cases where an entity is as promiscuous in its nature as to be possibly considered either a landscape or an artwork. Castagna’s *Chiesa all'aperto* is surely an example of those.¹¹

Ontological and phenomenological similarities result also in comparable appreciation and interpretation when considering *Chiesa all'aperto* and landscapes. In terms of appreciation, Castagna’s work does not merely present itself in a specific perceptual field.

Engaging the work is totalizing, and successful appreciation depends—at least in part—on attending multi-sensory features. Moreover, appreciators experience Castagna’s work “from within.” By considering what should guide our appreciation, and consequently warrant our interpretation, we realize that *Chiesa all’aperto*’s peculiar nature plays a relevant role. In effect, *Chiesa all’aperto* is one of those artworks that do not merely occupy a space, but “transforms” it. By drawing on Susan Feagin’s “Paintings and Their Place,” I argue that *Chiesa all’aperto* functions as “subjunctive space,” that is, a real space provoking individuals to act in various ways.¹² In effect, Castagna’s work creates a place for religious devotion and worship, for encounter and dialogue, for performing and listening. Its role as an elicitor of religious, social, and cultural experience is not a mere accident to its nature. On the contrary, it is intrinsic to it. I will miss much by merely attending *Chiesa all’aperto*’s formal aesthetic properties while ignoring its peculiar genesis, social function, and relationship with its surroundings, including the local communities.

By appreciating the preceding, two important points must be emphasized. First, when appropriate, considerations other than formal ones are fundamental for fully appreciating and correctly interpreting artworks, even artworks that may not be public as *Chiesa all’aperto*. As Joseph Margolis argues, artworks’ interpretation draws on many historical, conceptual, and practical resources transcending the formal aesthetic domain. Artworks are cultural entities whose understanding can take place only within an appropriate form of life (*Lebensform*).¹³ In this sense, artworks function sometimes as landscapes.

Second, when considering at least some landscapes, more traditional frames canonically used for guiding and justifying respectively artworks’ appreciation and interpretation may very well be useful. As in *Chiesa all’aperto*’s case, considerations of artistic intention, stylistic and generic membership, art-historical placement, and so on may very well be important to our understanding of a landscape. Consider again the *Boboli Gardens* in Florence. How could we fully appreciate and understand its complexities without referring to the design intended by its creators? How to exclude their being gardens of a particular style? As a consequence, landscapes function sometimes as artworks.

§4: Conclusion

By considering Castagna's *Chiesa all'aperto*, I have argued that landscapes and artworks are more similar than what assumed by environmental aesthetics. Their similarities do not depend on their formal aesthetic quality, but on their capacity of carrying "meanings" in ways traditionally attributed only to artworks. In this sense, landscapes and artworks are often appreciated and interpreted in light of their social and cultural role. Many consequences follow from my account of landscapes. However, let me highlight one, which I take as particularly pertinent to the topic of this conference. When considering landscapes, and in particular urban cities, from neighborhoods to cities at large, we could approach them as if they were artworks—a thesis defended also by Italian architect Marco Romano.¹⁴ By approaching them as artworks, we may be able to preserve and foster the social and cultural significance that cities possess. In fact, arguing for the thesis that urban landscapes as cities are like artworks is not encouraging a reductive "aesthetization" of the city, as if the city were an object of pure contemplation. On the contrary, it is intended to illuminate the possibility for the city (and its parts) to function as a "subjunctive space" for action, where certain public rituals, ceremonies, and rituals can take place. In this sense, we should approach the city by avoiding the Scylla of the "aesthetization" and the Charybdis of mere functionalism, which understands cities and their places as fulfilling basic tasks, such as offering shelter and permitting mobility. Cities can do much more than that.

Notes

¹For an introduction to environmental aesthetics, see Allen Carlson, "Aesthetics of the Environment," in S. Davies, K. M. Higgins, R. Hopkins, R. Stecker, and D.E. Cooper (eds.), *A Companion to Aesthetics: Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009). *Blackwell Reference Online*. 19 June 2012 <http://www.blackwellreference.com.libproxy.temple.edu/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405169226_chunk_g97814051692263_ss1-12>; "Environmental Aesthetics," in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/environmental-aesthetics/>; A. Berleant and A. Carlson (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Human Environments* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2007).

²For an overview of the debate between formalism and cognitivism in environmental aesthetics, see Glen Parsons and Allen Carlson, “New Formalism and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62 (2004): 363-376.

³For a sympathetic view, see also Raffaele Milani, *The Art of The Landscape* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009).

⁴For a discussion of the philosophical relevance of this aspect of Picasso’s painting, see Joseph Margolis, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 94.

⁵For a sustained discussion of appreciation, see Susan Feagin, *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetic of Appreciation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996)

⁶See Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, 28-29; and Kendal Walton, “Categories of Art,” *The Philosophical Review*, 79, (1970): 334-367.

⁷See Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, in particular, 34-37.

⁸Carlson, “Aesthetics of the environment.”

⁹In 2010, 18.2% residents in Zermeghedo were foreigners. For further details, see <http://www.comuni-italiani.it/024/120/statistiche/stranieri.html>

¹⁰It is unclear whether music has been actually performed there.

¹¹The possibility for artworks not being discrete objects seems to challenge many contemporary accounts of art ontology, which reduces artworks to the “mere real things,” that is, physical objects. See, among others, Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Joseph Margolis proposes the most inclusive criticism against reductive ontologies of art. See, for instance, Margolis, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?*; and, *The Cultural Space of the Arts and the Infelicities of Reductionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹²See Susan Feagin, “Paintings and Their Places,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 73 (1995): 260-268.

¹³See, for instance, Margolis, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?*, and *The Arts and the Definition of the Human: Toward a Philosophical Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁴See Marco Romano, *La città come opera d’arte* (Milano: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2008).