Ecological Aesthetics

Artful tactics for humans, nature, and politics

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Abstract

Stories that think and change; stories that deconstruct and distill; stories that make and provoke new stories, new pasts, presents, and potentials – all felt and thought, both affectively, and upon reflection.

Introduction

My new book, *Ecological Aesthetics: artful tactics for humans, nature, and politics* (Dartmouth College Press, to be released 3 July 2018) reminds us that stories are simple, but precious – and, perhaps, a bit too rare in current critical discourses. And they are the "artful tactic" with which I propose we mostly orient ourselves towards concern with the world: with humans, nature, and politics, with how we move-think-feel and act. I give in-depth narratives around about ten artists and their artworks, over ten sections, like a gentle manifesto, moving between strong statement and rich description, thoughtful definitions and punctuated rhythms.

An "ecological approach" takes account of agents, processes, thoughts, and relations. Humans and non-humans, matter and concepts, things and not-yet things, politics, technology, economics, and industry, for example, are all actively shaped in, and as, their interrelation. And "aesthetics" is five things: what can be said, shown, experienced, or practiced; what is said, shown, experienced, or practiced; how it is said, shown, experienced, or practiced; why it is said, shown, experienced, or practiced; and, most importantly, the stakes therein. It is, overall, a style of, and orientation towards, thought, and thus action.

For ISEA, I am proposing a paper and roundtable / panel discussion with four of the artists / art collectives I write about in this forthcoming book, to explore new forms of media-based art activism, which have us encounter a politics of generosity and beauty in the everyday, through stories, friendships, protests, walks, and other relationship-forms that cultivate looking, seeing, feeling, acting, and change.

Milwaukee's Overpass Light Brigade in action

For example, Durban-based, Mauritian-born artist and architect Doung Anwar Jahangeer's failed attempt at suicide resulted in a new life of walking and talking, teaching and learning, between his habitat and communities. Inspired by Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City" (1984b), Jahangeer continues this book's argument in showing us the difference between tactics and strategies, and the importance of vulnerability in the everyday. He takes interested parties on long walks around Zululand, and his politically charged but always generous artwork is literally an experience and practice of movement, a relation to others and their/our environments. Jahangeer points out what he calls the "organic intelligence" of cities, society, nature: emerging ecologies.

Or, former ISEA Co-Director Malcolm Levy makes prints and videos that are reminiscent of glitch art, which purposefully makes use of errors in media storage and/or playback formats as part of its aesthetic, most often inviting an experience of media's materiality, and/or our relationships to its concepts and forms. This artist's works present what happens when we accent how contemporary electronic sensors move and think and feel and break—at least in terms of what we have come to want and expect from today's consumer-based, "postinternet" technologies. Postinternet does not mean "after" the internet, but rather after its incorporation into the everyday: art and aesthetics that address the World Wide Web's (and broader contemporary technology's) effects on culture, society, and dialog.

a Doung Anwar Jahangeer *City Walk*

It is often talked about alongside the "new aesthetic," which refers to the increasing use of machine and digital ("new" media) images and forms in our physical and aesthetic world. Glitch, drone videos, augmented reality, surveillance, and GPS-generated maps and views are all examples of the new "born digital" aesthetic. Levy and his materials, processes, and images challenge the standard narratives we tell each other about computers—what they are, and do, and afford—and gift us with new ones, and thus new possibilities. Here we engage with Richard Grusin's "Radical Mediation" and Jussi Parikka's Anthrobscene to speculate on, wonder about, and move around those human constraints we thrust upon our machines, with microcontrol. What are their unseen impacts and ethical implications? Levy's other-frames bring to the fore the materiality of digital information, and images, and tools, and the inherent politics of how we make and relate to them.

The Overpass Light Brigade turns left-leaning Twitter sound bites into collaborative, physical messages that light up bridges for drivers and pedestrians to reflect on, or participate in. We will discuss how the team brings together individuals, each holding one lit-up alphanumeric character, to display changing activist messages on highways and at rallies. Theirs is a community of practice, a ripple effect of connections always a part of, and making, bodies, texts, meanings, policies, stories. This section pieces together Jean-Luc Nancy's being-with of matter and people and things, and simultaneously exhibits the ecological connections of many (and implicitly all) contemporary activist practices.

one of Malcolm Levy's *Other-frames*

Sean Slemon's *Goods for Me*

Finally, we will go on to contrast aesthetic versus ethical approaches to life and decision-making. South African-born and New York-based artist and teacher Sean Slemon produced *Goods for Me* (2011) and other tree-based works, where he pulls, breaks, or cuts down each of a tree's components—large and small leaves, various-sized branches, the trunk and roots—and compartmentalizes them into individual frames, like a cabinet of curiosities. These sculptural installations, which also house live bugs and ongoing decomposition, articulate nature and culture as continuously moving—and thus changing—together, and over varying timescales. Here we have an immediately felt experience—what Alfred North Whitehead calls "self-enjoyment" (1968: 150) and Eduardo Kohn calls an "aesthetic of the immediate" (2002: 70)—which also has us "concern" ourselves with the before and after, with the outside that both made for this occasion of experience, and where, with our help, it might be heading afterward (Whitehead 1968: 167). Overall, style and aesthetics, wonder and beauty, can have us think-with, and thus aim toward, a better future.

The everyday notion of representation could mean "to depict," or "to present again" (re-present), but Jean-Luc Nancy asserts that the "re- of the word representation is not repetitive but intensive . . . mental or intellectual representation is not foremost a copy of the thing," but an intensified presentation. It is "a presence that is presented" (Nancy 2007: 36; emphasis in original). The re- in represent is, in other words, an amplification; to represent is to present more of what is. Thinking further still, re-presenting could refer to the potency in and of the present. Here we move-think-feel with our present, and all the things (actions, objects, entities, and time itself) that led to this moment and encounter, all the things (conceptual, material, temporal, and otherwise) that might unfold from now. The present, and all that it is, is always more, is always present in its own fullness, and present as the things past and things to come; it can and should always be felt, both ecologically and aesthetically. To re-present in this way is to present our present (and more) as a presence.

Every aesthetic orientation is an ethical one, and vice versa. This panel is an experience and a practice, a call for experiences and practices, that takes account of aesthetics, ecologically (and ethically). And it ultimately asks us to do precisely this. Tell stories. Yours, each other's, the world's; tell stories of the things that matter.

Ecological Aesthetics (the book) and this panel are not about art – at least not exclusively. They ask us to continuously think- and act-with the world and its inhabitants, both human and nonhuman; to orient ourselves in ways that we might find and express what our environments, and what they are made of, want; and then to decisively help and continue those thoughts, wants, and actions along their way. More on the book project at http://ecologicalaesthetics.net; it's available via for pre-order Amazon at http://amzn.to/2lyREAk

Author(s) Biography(ies)

Nathaniel Stern < http://nathanielstern.com >is an artist and writer, Fulbright and NSF grantee and professor, interventionist and public citizen. He has produced and collaborated on projects ranging from ecological, participatory, and online interventions, interactive, immersive, and mixed reality environments, to prints, sculptures, videos, performances, and hybrid forms. His first book, Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance (Gylphi 2013), takes a close look at the stakes for interactive and digital art, and Ecological Aesthetics: artful tactics for humans, nature, and politics (Dartmouth 2018) is a creative and scholarly collection of stories about art, artists, and their materials, which argues that ecology, aesthetics, and ethics are inherently interconnected, and together act as the cornerstone for all contemporary arts practices."Technological, thought-provoking and unexpected" (NPR) Stern has been dubbed one of Milwaukee's "avant-garde" (Journal Sentinel), called "an interesting and prolific fixture" (Artthrob) behind many "multimedia experiments" (Time.com), "accessible and abstract simultaneously" (Art and Electronic Media web site), someone "with starry, starry eyes" (Wired.com) who "makes an obscene amount of work in an obscene amount of ways" (Bad at Sports) – both "bizarre and beautiful" (Gizmodo). According to Cory Doctorow at Boing Boing, Stern makes "beautiful, glitched out art-images," and Caleb A. Scharf at Scientific American says Stern's art is "tremendous fun," and "fascinating" in how it is "investigating the possibilities of human interaction and art." Stern is an Associate Professor of Art and Design in Peck School of the Arts at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, and a Research Associate at the Research Centre, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg.

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