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Enthusiasm for the Sublime: about exercising aesthetic awareness and experiential learning, by Paul Roncken

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The implicit reason to design an aesthetic landscape is fairly simple. It is to beautify or at least to establish an appreciate response between man and landscape. There is however a vivid series of recent contributions (Berleant, 1992; Carlson, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Saito, 2010) that articulates a distinction between 'artistic aesthetics' against something we can indicate as an 'environmental aesthetics'. The design of landscapes seems at times to be limited by 'too much wanting in art' (Olmsted, 1902, p. 51), especially considering our contemporary awareness of pollution, over exploitation of resources, loss of local identities and a general decrease of sensuous competences. The definition of 'environmental aesthetics' is used to negotiate all the conflicting experiences of our (everyday) landscapes. Some of these experiences can be more or less controlled by well designed interventions (e.g. Meyer, 2008) others – I suspect – are the mere result of incoherent circumstances or even neglect and demand not improved design instead an improved capacity for the digestion of experiences. Within this debate the implicit reasons to design an aesthetic landscape seems to be expanded to become (1) more explicit and (2) less determined by beautification. The idea to expand the definition of aesthetics is not dependent on an environmental or landscape related context, yet the pragmatic circumstances that orbit the appearances of environments and (everyday) landscapes provide such overwhelming evidence of 'negative aesthetics' that we are inclined to include such negativeness in any serious definition of aesthetics. Arnold Berleant for example refers to the idea of the sublime as a 'negative aesthetics' that confronts us unprepared and we have not yet developed cognitive and social structures to deal with the inherent changes it provides (Berleant, 1997, pp. 78, 79; 2009). However more truthful a more explicit and less beautified comprehension of aesthetics might seem to critics and philosophers, the mere existence of a 'negative aesthetics' is hardly appealing for designers that need to convince their clients and audience. Designers and clients would rather find an antidote against such negativeness, thereby interpreting aesthetics as the theory to provide them with the principles to do so.

To improve an inclusion of both designers, clients and philosophers in the fascinating discourse on aesthetic categories, I will create an argument that neutralizes the implicit favor for the 'positive' or 'appreciative' in aesthetics. By analyzing the accumulating idea of the sublime as an aesthetic category (Burke, 1759; Kant, 1790; Longinus, 1899; Lyotard, 1994; Weiskel, 1976) I will argue that what is perceived with great enthusiasm by painters, poets and nature explorers (e.g. Macfarlane, 2007; Muir, 1994; Newman, 1950-51) and landscape designers such as Adriaan Geuze and Michael van Valkenburgh (Horn, 2010; Louter, 2003) coincides with a philosophers argument to include both the 'negative' and the 'positive' in the concept of aesthetics. Any such inclusion questions a dominant 'appreciative' response of people amidst environments

or landscapes and instead points at a range of ‘exercising’ responses that define (environmental) aesthetics. Such an ‘exercising’ interpretation of aesthetics provides insight in the both the failures and successes of aesthetic interaction and interpretation. My main proposal is therefore to redefine aesthetic categories in terms of exercising positions and their projected educational development. The five aesthetic categories that I propose enable to expand the field of environmental and landscape design by aligning it with the educational categories of experiential learning that have been developed by Dewey (Dewey, 1929, 1933; Miettinen, 2000) and Kolb (Kolb, 1984).

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