

Book Reviews

Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (eds.), *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp.278, Paperback ISBN 0521 558549

The anthology contains eleven essays that focus the philosophical issue of interrelation between natural beauty and art, the issue which predominates an area of contemporary aesthetics. "At present", write the editors, "natural beauty is so riddled with conception derived from painting and poetry that landscape refers ambiguously to parts of nature and representation of nature in paintings, photographs and film". Ernst Gombrich, the noted British art historian, has argued that in the history of painting representation of actual or geographical landscape was preceded by the paintings' imaginary invention of landscapes, and later in the eighteenth century artistic categories were read into nature. There are two major questions with which aestheticians are concerned now: can art and nature be experienced on a common aesthetic ground, and secondly, on the same ground, can environment be aestheticized? Aesthetics is interpreted in its original Greek sense: any sensuous perception. In this connection Kant is preferred to Hegel who defined aesthetics as a philosophical discipline that examines the beauty of art and not of nature. Kant had said earlier, "Nature is beautiful because it looks like art and art can only be called beautiful if we are conscious of it as art while yet it looks like nature". Today Arnold Berleant, an American philosopher is a leading advocate for this Kantian view. He pleads that appreciation of nature and art follows a common method and aesthetics can accommodate both nature and art on equal terms.

T.J. Diffey in his essay "Natural Beauty without Metaphysics" does not of course side with any group, but expresses his dissatisfaction with the notion of beauty offered by different metaphysicians: "beauty as the object of biological or sexual interest; beauty disinterested appreciation of a rational mind; and an idealist rating of art above beauty in importance". He asserts that the fact that nature is beautiful is too common an experience to need any philosophical justification. He thinks that the aesthetic issues about art have their sources in aesthetic issues about nature; and we understand the aesthetic beauty through an understanding of a natural beauty. But the major observation by Aristotle remains unanswered: how to contradict his view that the ugly in nature appears beautiful in art? The specific beauty of art lies with representational quality. Nobody denies beauty of nature - whatever that phenomenon may be. But one regrets with justification that a common aesthetics for accommodating both art and nature cannot be accepted. There may, however, be two different aesthetic systems for art and nature.

Donald Crawford is wise to avoid the issue of a common aesthetics and agrees for the possibility of comparison between aesthetic beauty and natural beauty on two grounds: first the organic unity principle common in both nature and art as observed by the classical thinkers as well as the modern formalists through Hegel; and second, the contextualist view of expressiveness of both art and nature which the environmentalist upholds. Both are expressive in their own context—art in its cultural context and natural beauty in its environmental context. If aesthetics is a principle for appreciating and judging beauty, then there cannot be a common principle for judging these two different phenomena. Comparison is, however, possible even between two dissimilar things. But there are certainly some common features between art and nature on which they can be rationally compared.

Authors have approached the concept of nature from historical, political and religious perspectives. Allen Carlson proposes a scientific construal of nature. He argues that the notion of appreciation involves the notion of aesthetic attitude; and since attitude is a suggestive phenom-

enon, attitude-based appreciation seems to be limited in scope. To appreciate something aesthetically is to appreciate it as and for "what it is, and not another thing". Carlson thinks that appreciation of design and order is the paradigm of art appreciation, although this appreciation varies with regard to the nature of the artwork that makes distinctive demands of the viewer's physical and psychical capacities. Consequently, Carlson now turns to the point observed by Crawford: appreciation of order and design in art stands closer to the appreciation of nature along the lines of classical thought as well as of Hegel's. It is the scientific account of nature rather than the mythical, mystical, poetic and religious ones which plays the crucial role in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Arnold Berleant, rejecting any comparison between the experience of art and that of nature, advocates consistently what he has already done in his earlier works, for a single theory of aesthetic experience that would accommodate both art and nature on the same terms.

The volume is not intended to offer any final solution to the problems concerned with the nature of art and environment with their similarities and dissimilarities, and with the possibility of a monist or pluralist mode of experience of both these phenomena. The chief merit of the book lies in its exhibition of the wide ranging area that our reflection on the interrelationship of art and nature covers. Each essay provokes our rethinking of what we knew earlier opening at the same time before us a number of choices for our free and unprejudiced consideration.

B.C. Nath

Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art comes from and Why?*, University of Washington Press edition, paperback, 1995 (First published by the Free Press, 1992), PXXII+297

Ellen Dissanayake has been consistently promoting, since her publication of *What is Art For?* in 1988, an ethological view of art, i.e., art is a necessary human behaviour: "Viewing the species *Homo Sapiens* as it evolves and expresses a behaviour of art is a way of understanding ourselves and the modest *condition humans*." She has been persuasively claiming that our sense of beauty has a biological justification and art evolved as a human behaviour necessary for the survival of this species—art's principal need has been to make such important social activities as rituals and ceremonies memorable and pleasurable, and as such man's need for art has been ultimately a social need, for promoting group solidarity and a cultural identity. She acknowledges that such a view of art is based on the scientific discoveries of the Harvard entomologist Edward Wifson incorporated by her revelations of direct experience in the Third World Indian subcontinent, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea. It is interesting to note that her findings combine the Western scientific analyses with the Eastern mystic revelations particularly, the way she has juxtaposed two photographs on page 57 (*What is Art For?*), an Indian bride with a tattooed Japanese—makes her points clear that man's love for ornaments and colours are not cultural (learned) rather biological (inborn)—for a man it is something "species entry". Here, an Indian reader remembers Kalidasa's famous observations that ornamentation does not constitute a beautiful form; the reverse is rather the truth—it is a beautiful form that justifies the use of ornaments. An Indian bride in her ritual costume (not only the ornaments, even the typical look, gestures with half-lifted veil and the typical mysterious smile) is more a piece of art than any natural being, aesthetically expressive no less than any painting of any artist in the world. Hence artworld should not be confined only to the institution or media, nor is the artwork any finished artifact that is accepted by such institutions as a work of art. As artwork has been an "unravished bride" because of its emotional appeal, a value which has made the survival of human beings possible throughout their long course of evolution. *Homo Sapiens* is also *homo aestheticus*. Man is not simply a wise animal, he is also an aesthetic animal. In tracing the biological origin of art Dissanayake rejects Duchamp's view that "Art has no biological source".

Dissanayake writes, "*Homo Aestheticus* explores the ways in which humans are inherently aesthetic and artistic creatures." The book under review is a sequel to her *What Is Art For* and she rightly thinks that both the titles are complementary.

Like language, art is a *natural* human behaviour, but as the differences in *Parole*, so to say, is a matter of cultural imposition so also "arts and related aesthetic attitudes vary so widely from one society to another would seem to suggest that they are wholly learned or 'cultural' in origin rather than.... also biological in nature"..."art can be regarded as a natural, general proclivity that manifests itself in culturally learned specifics such as dances, songs, performances, visual display and poetic speech". There are three critical keys to understanding where art comes from and why: (i) individuals and cultures vary concerning what they practice and revere, (ii) the inherent tension between the *natural* (the given) and the cultural (humanly imposed) and (iii) the attraction humans specifically find in the unusual and extraordinary phenomena (P.XII). The author then is convinced that "contemporary art and contemporary life can best be regarded not from the prospect of philosophy, sociology, history, anthropology, psychology or psychoanalysis - in their modern or postmodern forms - but within the long view of human biological evolution." (P.XII).

Dissanayake is fed up with jargonised thinking of both the traditions modernism and postmodernism. Since she sincerely feels that the advocates of these traditions have consistently tried to remove art from its intimacy with human life itself; i.e., the very fact that art as a biological need provides the reason for living itself to cultivate what is called "aesthetic experience" is the only purpose of human life - neither to "end art" nor to "end aesthetic experience.". Dickie and Danto are therefore spared in favour of Berenson, Bell and Puskin.

Similarly, Dissanayake is courageous enough to express her utter dissatisfaction with the debates that are going on in the postmodernist critical parlours. If the pre-Derridean Western culture suffered from logocentrism then the post-Derridean culture suffers from scriptocentrism which terribly tends to destroy human sensibility. The reactionary anti-colonialism wing of poststructuralism, in spite of its genuine struggle for erasing the hegemony of Western culture as a whole, cannot save humanity from the rapid decline of the very reason of its origin, existence and continuity. The author's advice to turn away from the scriptomaniac "language-mediated-ideology" to "stones, water, weather, the loving work of human hands, the expressive sounds of human voices, the immense, mysterious and eternal" sounds absolutely prophetic. *Homo Aestheticus*, is a bold and timely venture in restoring art as the very symbol of human existence as well as of its continuity into an unending future.

Gohn K. Grande, *Balance: Art and Nature* Black Rose Books Ltd, Montreal etc., 1994, PP.250

One of the most dangerous implications of the institutional theory of art has been that it has ruthlessly legitimized the collusion of media, commercial organizations and cultural and administrative bureaucracies rather than genuine art critics and audience in both appreciating and evaluating the art works and their artists.

One can imagine the fatal consequence of adjudicating the aesthetic merit of a artwork in terms of its commercial value. Contemporary internationalism of the artworld is mostly a commercial phenomenon and is often an aesthetic hoax rather than a sign of genuine creativity. In Grande's view, a genuine work of art must represent/express humanity's relation to nature, the environment we live in. Like Gregory Currie (*An Ontology of Art*, 1989), as against Goodman, he acknowledges "the origins and limits to materials, cultural specificity and the contest in which one works" as essential ingredients for an artwork. According to him, as man himself, art is also a part of nature and nature is not "mere matter to be manipulated, transposed and reformed in order to affirm our

superiority over nature". He therefore rejects the nature-art dichotomy so strongly advocated by artists and critics as Marcel Duchamp, Arthur Danto and Theodor Adorno.

The problem that disturbs the ecological thinkers today is man's conceit in mishandling nature even destroying nature in the name of recasting it for his so-called welfare or privileged existence. As a consequence the severe damage caused to environment by man's attitude such as this, has now sufficiently warned him that this attitude, if continues any longer, will remove human civilization in no time. Therefore, not only scientists aestheticians, artists and philosophers should also wisely modify their ideas of and attitude to nature before it is too late. Aristotle's definition of art as imitation of nature has provoked a sense of man's creative inferiority to nature, therefore serious attempts have been made to either reject the concept of imitation altogether or to reinterpret it as a copy not of any finished product of nature but of the very creative spirit of nature. But how to ignore the origins of human creativity in nature itself? Grande has very wisely appealed to Friedrich Kiesler's theory of "correalism", "the mutual inter-dependence of organisms", "the dynamics of continual inter-actions between man and his natural and technological environments" for a total revision in our thought pattern regarding the relationship of man with nature in creation of the arts.

Grande repeats his conviction in several of his essays collected in this book: "We must rediscover nature's place in human culture at large if the world is to survive and prosper." (p.77) "Nature must remain the model on which the forms for the future are built." (P.93). And in his appreciation of the artists like Anish Kapoor, Andy Goldsworthy, Armand Vaillancourt and James Carl Grande synthesizes his aesthetic experience into a theoretical model which he puts succinctly in his essay "Outside, History, Inside, Nature":

As we approach the end of the 2nd millennium, it is more evident than ever that our traditional Western approach to art must come to an end. Our extensive dependence on the syntax of our art, its structural basis, is indeed a weakness and not, finally, a strength. It is possible that we can replace it with a more subtle but longer lasting vision of art whose main premise is its silent integration into a built or natural environment. This approach would, out of necessity, require a greater exploration of the driving forces behind our unconscious; of our biological origins and our endemic relation to nature. An art of the future may also represent a modest integration of Eastern and Western values of what art is or could be. Our art and architecture could be revived if we realize the volatile, endlessly changing characteristics of all materials in nature, both organic and inorganic. All act according to natural laws should be as important to the artists as to the pure scientist. Art can play a leading role in guiding our society towards a regenerative, intuitive vision of the life process. Our connectedness to nature is part of a holistic energy of life, which is both etherial and physical. If our artists can understand this process more fully in a sensitized way, then we can cast aside the appropriative models and structural layerings of today's art.

Grande's ideas and style both are fresh, sincere, intuitive, lively and impelling enough to recast the common run of aesthetical thinking in contemporary academic programmes.

Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1992, PP.XIV+218.

One immediately agrees with the author that although the new field of knowledge called environmental aesthetics is an international and multi-disciplinary phenomenon—a convergence philosophy, cultural geography and anthropology, environmental design, horticulture, agriculture, city planning and architecture - it is never merely a derivative area of knowledge. As an autonomous discipline with its own problems and principles it deals with regional and international environmental policies and problems and makes the public aware of environmental crises as well as of

the aesthetic values of/in environment. But it is difficult to agree with the author that "all aesthetic is, in some sense, applied". As it is understood, aesthetics is a cognitive science or activity that determines the nature of beauty in both nature and man-made arts as also determines beauty as an emotional value immensely significant for human culture. On the other hand, when the principles of this cognitive science applied in evaluation of particular artworks or the beauty of any natural phenomenon, the function might be called criticism—inevitably an evaluative activity. "Applied aesthetics" as the contemporary Finnish thinkers have coined the phrase, refers to that branch of human activity which deliberately applies aesthetic principles, i.e., the principles of beauty as an emotional value to the areas and activities of man which are normally non-emotional, related to the practical aspects of human life such as weaving clothes, constructing houses, making vehicles, addressing an audience for political purpose otherwise and manners, customs and behaviour in general. In other words, applied aesthetics might mean beautification of human life as a whole. Considered in this light environmental aesthetics is a part of applied aesthetics. But this does not mean to say that applied aesthetics tends to erase the age-old difference between mimetic (fine) and productive (craft) arts. That's a different critical debate which one should carefully avoid here.

From Aristotle to Marcel Duchamp art has been considered superior to natural phenomena, and obviously art and nature are antonyms implying that only art carries aesthetic value whereas nature/environment does not. With the exception of the romantics environment has always been regarded something passive, an inanimate background for human life which seldom plays any significant role in man's survival and elevation. But man has now realised the devastating result of this attitude to his environment, and Berleant's central strategy for providing a prophetic direction for saving humanity from this ensuing annihilation is "to reconceptualize environment and recognize its aesthetic implication" so that the environment-bridge will remain unravished, "We are coming to realize that", he writes, "nature is not alien to the human world nor is environment an external territory. Aesthetics can help us grasp, in both theoretical terms and concrete situations, the inseparability of the human and the natural... We discover in the aesthetic perception of environment the reciprocity, indeed the confirmity of forces in our world—those generated by human action and those to which we must respond. And we find in their ultimate identity not only the qualitative directness of experience but the immediacy of our engagement. Environmental aesthetics as theory and as experience, can help us achieve a truer sense of the human condition." (P.XIII)

Berleant works out his project in twelve chapters. Although one may not agree with his statement that everything has an aesthetic dimension and an aesthetic dimension is inherent in every experience of everything—which may sound extremist from the Western point of view—Berleant finds strong support from the ancient Indian tradition particularly from the Kashmirian Saiva Philosophers of the 9th and 10th centuries. His holistic and phenomenological concept of nature,— "this last sense of nature, which does not differentiate between the human and the natural and which interprets everything as part of a single, continuous whole corresponds to the largest idea of environment....Environment, as I want to speak of it, is the natural process as people live it, *however* they live it. Environment is nature experienced, nature lived.") is parallel to the Sankhya-yoga concept of Prakriti (Nature). Berleant's idea of an aesthetics of engagement as opposed to a contemplative appreciation of beauty has also been explained in the light of Indian aesthetics in my essay "Aesthetics beyond/within Aesthetics" published in the volume XVIII of this journal. Environmental aesthetics interpreted as an anticolonial phenomenon suggesting "deep political changes away from hierarchy and its exercise of power and toward community, where people freely engage in naturally fulfilling activities. It implies a human family order that relinquishes authoritarian control

and encourages cooperation and reciprocity. It leads toward acceptance, friendship, and love that abandon exploitation and possessiveness and promote sharing and mutual empowerment." (P.13)

Berleant's observations are not evidently confined to the aesthetics of environment, i.e., experiencing only environment aesthetically. His is a large scale programme for a radical revolution in our world view—aesthetification of human life as a whole—perhaps contributing to the ideas of Ellen Dissanayake's homo aestheticus from a different angle. What is prominent in all these writers is a view that aesthetics neither is nor should be simply a speculative science, just another intellectual luxury item meant for academic syllabus or drawingroom debate, it is an urgent need for common people who should participate in and therefore carefully reconstruct and preserve the beauty of environment which they experience as an integrated and vital part of it. This is also "descriptive aesthetics" as different from the traditional "substantive aesthetics".

The book is a landmark in the recent aesthetical thinking. Keeping carefully away from the popular intellectual debates of the present decade, the author feels sincerely concerned with man's spiritual enhancement, and what he offers is an humble suggestion for self-elevation rather than any jargonistic rigor for futile exercise of conceit and snobbery.

A.C.Sukla

Richard Eldridge (Ed.), *Beyond Representation : Philosophy and Poetic Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996 (ISBN 0-521-4807- 9-5) PP.306.

The editor collects eleven essays and contributes an introduction setting up the theoretical basis common to all the essays he collects: "Each of the essays that are collected here moves broadly in the orbit of the Kantian–Hegelian conception of the human subject as a subject of and in *poiesis*. They track various modes—often themselves involving gender, class position, and national tradition—of the uncovering and exercise of human poetic powers creatively to envision a just and free culture, drawing on, but also against the grain of, forms of cultural life that are already in place. At the same time, these essays follow out moments of self-interrogation and self-criticism in the uncovering and exercise of poetic powers, moments in which the very sense that one possesses these powers is blocked by an awareness of the force of antagonisms in culture, present and foreseeable. In each essay there is a pronounced emphasis on the priority of the process of the continual...of subjects and their culture over the completed and substantial nature of the subjects and the cultures that are thus refigured...the writers of these essays participate in just the antagonistic logic of always refigurative self-consciousness that they are undertaking to describe." (P.14)

As the title of the anthology suggests, the theoretical unity that blends these essays together presupposes that the poetic imagination is a human faculty that transcends the representational function of mind, language and society—transcends the notion, Cartesian in origin, that out of a critical theory of representations philosophy would derive a critical theory of culture—the notion which impelled the thinkers of the 17th, 18th and the logical atomists and logical positivists of the 20th century to consider the task of philosophy as providing a critical theory of representations of the world. Instead, against the Cartesian conceptions of a "punctual subject", it is now proposed to conceive of the human subject a subject of and within *poiesis* - the term and concept as used by Plato and Aristotle, for opposing the concepts of *logos/theoria/praxis/episteme/poiesis*, means *mimesis*, i.e., making of any imitative representation, not merely making something unreal or fictitious, but also communicating emotions and feelings. Thus *mimemata*, the products of *poiesis*, such as representations of appearances, moods, characters moral and political interests and action and their meanings are all significant for human life. The editor endorses the Kantian notion of human subjects—subjects in and through *poiesis* as it is recently propounded by Philippe Lacoue Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in their work *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in*

German Romanticism (The English translation SUNY Press 1988). According to them, poetic practice is not controlled by the movements of material nature, is not arbitrarily conventional, nor does reflect only brute external realities of power, but instead is a "practice in and through which possibilities of free human cultural activity are recalled, envisioned and criticized." Poetic practice is an eternal process of human *Bildung* a process in which the subject is caught up continually seeking to become unified and free from the bondage of any cultural routines. Poetic *Bildung* is therefore deeper than and/or logically prior to any epistemological testing of already formed representations for correspondence to reality or for coherence. This *Bildung* or *poiesis* may be compared to Adorno's notion of *open thinking*.

Representation ceases to be a term connoting second presentation or presenting again. It should be understood as to render something present (P.292), Charles Altieri rejects both the "aesthetic ideology"/ the hedonistic approach as well as the recent political approach to art and instead prefers Longinus' view of art as a "work of articulation"- a movement from potentiality to actuality and not simply a representation or reproduction of what already exists. Thus *poiesis* is, in Hegel's view, self's ongoing refiguration/projection of itself (elaborated by J.M.Bernstein's essay). Arthur Danto, a noted anti-Cartesian, according to whom the human subject is that which comes to its representational consciousness and self-consciousness only in and through its formed social world and a work of art is that which invents "modes of embodying meanings she or he may share with communities" demands that "philosophers should be encouraged to speak in their own voice about the world that means something to them. The freer the voice, the better the philosophy." (P.105) Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, following Friedrich Schlegel, interpret Aristotle's idea of *opsis* not as spectacle with its visual paradigm (since Aristotle observes that the aim of tragedy, i.e., catharsis of pity and fear, is accomplished even by reading the text aloud) but as the *scene*, the place of the continual coming-to-be of the subject.

Some of the essays, particularly the last one by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy deviate from the common run of critical style of neutrality, and the editor, though admits that they might be misunderstood or suspected by certain "materialist cast of mind", nevertheless justifies these envisionings as the free expression of subjectivity in its continual enacted-enacting process which is the very goal of poetic imagination that goes far beyond the world of Cartesian representation. The anthology makes the reader aware of a resurgence of romanticism in its new garb. Once again Hegel and Schlegel lead the critical community tending to push back the materialist definition of culture and human subject by their slogan for a continual unfolding of consciousness as the only way of cultural liberation.

B.C. Dash