Anthropocene Aesthetics: A Revaluation of Values

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Introduction

In 'The Poetics of Space', Gaston Bachelard (2014, p.5) claims that 'all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home'. Widely recognised as a powerful archetype, the concept of home is heavily imbued with values such as shelter, comfort, stability and safety. But how do we grapple with the realisation that our home is unstable, dangerous terrain? In a planet contending with hotter temperatures, rising seas, mass extinction, depleted lands, ocean acidification, forced migration, and a plethora of ongoing human and more-than-human catastrophes, we desperately seek for shelter from the storm of apocalypses that are presaged to us en masse (Grove, 2019). And so, in order to escape the cataclysm that allegedly awaits us, in the hope to put a stop to the end of the world as we know it, we claim that we must "save nature", "protect the environment", "live sustainably". We argue that recycling is good, plastic is bad, and that we must become greener. But these values, entrenched in morality, are part and parcel of the narratives that got us here in the first place. We are looking for shelter in the same story we have been told throughout modernity – that we should seek improvement, growth, betterment, and that we ought to seek it with ravaging determination, no matter what gets wrecked in the way. That story is the myth of progress (Black Mountain Manifesto, 2010).

It's in contending with this myth – a myth of annunciation, a myth that tells us that civilisation is the only fruitful pursuit because it is in civilisation that we can find the guarantee of a better future – that we might find ourselves revisiting Nietzsche's call for a revaluation of values. In 'The Genealogy of Morals', Nietzsche (2014) makes evident that 'good' and 'evil', notions by which we still organise much of our lives and beliefs today, do not derive from a history of favourable outcomes but instead from a history of social and political differences: in Ancient Greece, the 'good' were the noble, the strong, the powerful, the high-minded; the 'bad' were the slaves, the weak, the ill, the inferior. In other words, values derive from situated perspectives of appraisal. Nietzsche's plead, in contrast, is for a radically immanent understanding of values, for an approach that situates values in the world, in our practices and forms of living.

Perhaps it is time to answer Nietzsche's call to revaluate our values and modes of valuation, if we are to experiment with ways of living and dying well in our tumultuous times. Which is to say that, if we are to attempt to live lives worth living in the ecological catastrophe that we are in, if we are to respond politically 'while we still can' (Savransky, 2021a) – freed from the shackles of progress that got us here in the first place – then we might need to do away with 'nature' itself. It is in order to plunge into this 'perhaps' (Savransky, 2021a) that I will call on Alfred North Whitehead (2006) and his protest against the 'bifurcation of nature' that constitutes one of the pillars of much of modern thought. But let us remind ourselves that thinking, on its own, won't suffice. As Martin Savransky (2019, p.143) puts it, 'we cannot think our way out of our way of being but must live our way into another mode of thinking'. It is with this belief in practical experimentation that this essay proposes embracing not only a revaluation of 'nature' but also of our aesthetic worlds. One might ask, why aesthetics? Aesthetics, as we know today, as based on the judgement of a few, has since the 18th century upheld precisely the bifurcation of nature that is at the core of the problem (Sehgal, 2018). Perhaps that is exactly why it is worth exploring some of the entanglements and potentialities of the relationship between these revaluated domains. For if the bifurcation of nature has placed aesthetics in the sphere of culture, of the values that are attributed to things rather than intrinsic, then perhaps it is in a revaluation of aesthetics – by giving ourselves to an experimentation with the practices and relations that we're in – that we can attempt to find new ways of inhabiting a world grappling with the devastation of its end. That is what I aim to affirm in this essay.

With the help of guiding voices such as that of Isabelle Stengers, Martin Savransky, Melanie Sehgal, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and T.J. Demos, I would like to contend that aesthetics – that is, an aesthetics free of judgement, an expanded and pluralist aesthetics – is a door worth opening, if we are looking for paths worth carving in and within unfolding social and ecological ends. To explore this possibility, I will look at the example of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, an experiment in autonomy and resistance against an airport and its world, which might teach us something about alternative ways of inhabiting places and creating new value-ecologies in the face of capitalism's wreckage. I will pay particular attention to first hand testimonies from occupants of the ZAD found in three short films – 'Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: the ZAD' (2017), 'Notre Flamme des Landes: The Illegal Lighthouse Against an Airport and Its World' (2021), and 'Rear Window: Zone À Défendre (2017)' – in a search for clues on how new aesthetic 'value-intensities' (Savransky, 2024) might make themselves felt, and how they might help re-awaken our anaesthetised ecological imaginations.

Nature and the Aesthetics of the Anthropocene

As Martin Savransky (2024, p.1) puts it, the contemporary environmental condition gives us 'the sense of an ending that seems to coincide with a certain ending of sense'. Aesthetics, as we've come to know it in the Western tradition, appears to have been suffering from a hereditary dormancy resulting from a crisis in perception (Buck-Morss, 1992) passed down from the onset of modernity to this day. Bouncing 'like a ball between philosophical positions' (Buck-Morss, 1992, p.7), from aesthesis – a theory of sensuous perception – to a mode of valuation dedicated to cultural representations (Sehgal, 2018; Savransky, 2024), the realm of aesthetics has undergone a metamorphosis with complex social and ecological entanglements. But this process didn't happen in a vacuum. As Alfred North Whitehead (2006) makes perceptible, the scientific field has, since the 17th century, adopted a mechanistic theory of nature that came to contaminate how we organise not only scientific knowledge but indeed, the wider spectrum of public life. This theory poses that nature is, in fact, a succession of instantaneous configurations of matter, and that the characteristics we apprehend are simply the offspring of our imagination. Whitehead (2006, p.54) illustrates:

The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.

This separation of sensory experience, with its multiple and synaesthetic modes of feeling, from what is to be considered a 'scientific truth', comes to uphold what Whitehead (2006, p.31) terms the 'bifurcation of nature':

Another way of phrasing this theory which I am arguing against is to bifurcate nature into two divisions, namely into the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness. The nature which is the fact apprehended in awareness holds within it the greenness of the trees, the song of the birds, the warmth of the sun, the hardness of the chairs, and the feel of the velvet. The nature which is the cause of awareness is the conjectured system of molecules and electrons which so affects the mind as to produce the awareness of apparent nature.

It is here that we can begin to see the process, and indeed the catastrophe, of nature and aesthetics becoming anaesthetic: everything we experience through our corporeal sensorium is, in fact, not there, and everything that is there is inaccessible to our direct experience. This principle, taken as a universal law that everyone (and everything) is implicated in equally, gives rise to a homogenisation of the Earth into a single, global entity called Nature, seen as separated from culture and civilisation – and most importantly, available to be manipulated, colonised and extracted (Demos, 2017; Mirzoeff, 2011; Savransky, 2021b).

Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011, cited in 2014, p. 216) says that 'visualising is a hierarchical, indeed autocratic, means of imagining the social as permanent conflict'. The goal is maintaining the authority of the visualiser beyond their material power. This is embodied in the West's call for the 'conquest of nature', a call that pursues not only the colonial quest for occupation of territory but also, and devastatingly, an understanding of non-human and non-European worlds as enemies to be subdued. Mirzoeff (2014) reveals how this is promoted by the 'aesthetics of the Anthropocene', demonstrating how key artworks in modern Western painting aestheticised the perception of environmental destruction, with deliberately European examples such as Monet and Bellows portraying it as a sublime object of contemplation. Paintings like Monet's 'Unloading Coal' (see Mirzoeff, 2014) form a skillful phantasmagoria, coherently unifying production, consumption, and the degradation of environmental conditions after the Industrial Revolution into seductive representations of human superiority over nature. Enchanting veils of smoke, fog, and air pollution become the painterly mechanisms through which these artworks numb our perception of the ecological devastation unfolding before our eyes, all while we bask in the glory of our perceived domination over more-than-human worlds. Indeed, we can see how both artistic and techno-scientific representations grant viewers a 'sense of control over the represented object of their gaze, even if that control is far from reality' (Demos, 2017, p.28). Demos (2017, p.28) contends:

> *Anthropocene visuality tends to reinforce the techno-utopian position that "we" have indeed mastered nature, just as we have mastered its imaging – and in fact the two, the dual colonisation of nature and representation, appear inextricably intertwined.*

Etymologically, the origins of the term Anthropocene support the logic that human activities are to be blamed for this new geological epoch. Yet, as Demos (2017) demonstrates, the activities most commonly highlighted by the Anthropocene discourse are, in great part, the activities of corporations – an aspect which is often concealed. The contemporary aesthetics of the Anthropocene, Demos (2017) shows us, relying in great part on high-resolution visualisations of data collected by satellite-based sensors, largely imperceptible to the human eye, further supports this concealment. Although deeply embedded in complex political and economic relationships and delivered by largely Western-based military-state-corporate apparatus, these images are presented as innocent, self-evident pictures that make climate change legible and widely sharable – without the acknowledgement of the political agendas that they serve and of the extent to which they have been edited and interpreted for viewers (Demos, 2017). In other words, this technoaesthetics functions like a contemporary phantasmagoria, creating an illusion of unity through militarised representations of a whole, universalised world that, in line with the wider Anthropocene rhetoric, enable 'the military-state-corporate apparatus to disavow

responsibility for the differentiated impacts of climate change, effectively obscuring the accountability behind the mounting eco-catastrophe' (Demos, 2017, p.19). Moreover, the systematic representation of the Earth as a globe, widely utilised as a foundation for the production of knowledge – be it social, political, geographical, scientific or economic – effectively erases the existence of the plural and divergent forms of life that inhabit the planet, many of which don't share our modern belief systems and indeed form a multiplicity of divergent value-ecologies, practices, subjectivities, human and more-than-human relations that get wiped out by anthropocenic representations and the systems that create them (Savransky, 2021b).

With Nietzsche's call for a revaluation of values in mind, feeling the sense of urgency brought about by a sensed 'swan song' (Savransky, 2024), we might feel compelled to join Demos (2017, p.37) in asking:

> *How can we mobilise politically around a catastrophe's invisibilities, given our culture's fixation on the spectacular production of images framed with happy Hollywood endings (…)? And how to combat images that work toward assuring us of the controllability of climate change, even while they reinforce the idea that we are all responsible, insofar as we humans are all part of anthropos, and that anthropos can conquer all?'*

Reclaiming Aesthetics

It is important to understand what we are contending with while living with and within the undifferentiating rhetoric of the Anthropocene and the systems that uphold it. As we have seen, we cannot underestimate the power of aesthetics in perpetuating both the invisibility of plural worlds and of the forces that insist on eradicating them. But we are in the business of revaluating values and modes of valuation. So if we are to commit to this experiment, if we are to critically understand the relationship between nature and aesthetics and make it a worthy pursuit, then looking at cultural and technological representations alone might not suffice. Deleuze says of Nietzsche that 'we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts that we deserve given our way of being and our style of life' (2006, quoted in Savransky, 2019). As such, it is necessary to change our ways of living if we are to attempt to modify our perspectives of appraisal. That is to say that we might have to allow ourselves to be taken on an adventure that, as Savransky (2024) says, 'bursts' beyond the systems and traditions that uphold the bifurcation of nature; beyond an understanding of values that are attributed rather than immanent. The answer that our contemporary circumstances require of us might be to go as far as exploding aesthetics – to encompass a much broader and pluralistic multiplicity of practices, experiences, modes and strategies for living in and with human and more-than-human worlds. How do we make this a possibility while imprisoned by the shackles of progress?

Isabelle Stengers (2000, p.148) argues:

Rather than a strictly ethical question, it is much more of a question of what Felix Guattari has called a 'new aesthetic paradigm', where aesthetic designates first of all a production of existence that concerns one's capacity to feel: the capacity to be affected by the world, not in a mode of subjected interaction, but rather in a double creation of meaning, of oneself and the world.

Melanie Sehgal (2018) shows us that Whitehead, too, believes in the importance of feeling. Instead of rejecting aesthetics because of its entanglement in the bifurcation of nature, he contends that aesthetic concerns should be generalised. For Whitehead, 'values and relationality are part of the fundamental mode of becoming of all kinds of events, not only "aesthetic" ones in the narrow modern sense' (Sehgal, 2018, p.120). Sehgal (2018, p.120) elaborates:

Rather than being compartmentalised and limited to the realm of art or a specific kind of human experience, the aesthetic for Whitehead, as for Dewey or Sourieau, permeates the continuum of experience, not even confined to the human. Such a generalisation of aesthetic concerns marks the first step for thinking about and practicing aesthetics beyond a frame of thought whose habit has become to let nature bifurcate.

Let us join Sehgal (2018, p.118) in asking, 'how would or do aesthetic practices that avoid letting nature bifurcate look like'? Or perhaps it would be more fitting to ask, how do they feel? If we allow ourselves to speculate on the possibilities of aesthetics outside the realm of specific objects and subjects, or, as Savransky (2024) puts it, of an 'aesthetics of the outside', where might we find the cracks that allow the capacity to feel to come through, and indeed, to flourish?

Perhaps we should pause our progress-driven obsession to look forward and take a moment to look backward instead. Before the modern concept of art evolved amongst the mostly male elite in the metropolises of colonial Europe (soon colonising imaginations everywhere), it encompassed a plethora of everyday activities – from shoe-making to cooking, storytelling to folk dancing – and it did so for thousands of years (Jordan, 2021). As Jay Jordan (2021, p.392) shows, this new idea of art began to rip apart things that used to be inseparable: 'artists from artisans, genius from skill, the beautiful from the useful, culture from nature, art from life'. They (2021, p.392) point out:

The activities pushed down the ladder and out of the public eye were the useful situated things, such as wheelwrights and potters, women's house worlding crafts (…) or anything entertaining (…) which would break the calm and contemplation with its rough loudness. The power relations amplified during the witch-hunts were being upheld in the name of the brand new definition of "aesthetics", which was no

longer linked to increasing our capacity to perceive with our senses, but a contemplative aloof, refined intellectualised sense of taste for a polite elite.

It is looking at this metamorphosis that we can begin to sense a 'vector of intensity' (Savransky, 2024), and bring to light the possibility that our revaluation of aesthetics might require, in fact, a reclamation. As we see with Savransky (2024), it is not a matter of bringing back the precise modes of feeling through which ravaged and gone worlds made themselves felt. 'There are real losses, and no longing gesture of melancholy or nostalgia will enable us to reclaim the modes of sensing lost to value extraction, colonial destruction and climate collapse' (2024, p.3). What this reclamation affirms, however, is that perhaps there is a glimmer of possibility in the reversal of the process by which values have been extracted from the expansive field of lived experience – of feeling – and transcendentalised, which is to say, reduced to a matter of judgement based on pre-existing universal principles of taste (Savransky, 2024, p.4). This reversal of transcendentalisation is embedded in how Savransky proposes we approach Guattari's (1995) 'new aesthetic paradigm':

As a call, in other words, to reactivate a notion of aesthetics no longer confined to its modern sphere of relevance, (…) but rather spreading over and infecting a radically expanded landscape of practices of creation and plural modes of existence. And if it is thus that one may approach this new aesthetic paradigm, it is because key to its novelty and potential is the attempt to think aesthesis in the presence of a multiple and radically fragmentary outside, (…) of that which remains improper and unnamed, unformed and indeterminate, unknown and impossible, underway and yet to be made. (Savransky, 2024, p.5)

The fact is that multiple fugitive worlds-to-be-made are already in traction. Despite capitalism's relentless wreckage, 'aesthetic machines' (Savransky, 2024) put to work by inventive collectives place resistance and creativity in the very fabric of everyday life, fostering plural modes of existence with and within ends that are nigh. These experiments make real the possibility of lives worth living in the face of ecological devastation; they propel interstitial worlds and re-ignite our anaesthetised social imaginations.

Zone à Défendre: Defending Pluralist Value-Ecologies

Jordan (2021, p.390) poignantly asks: 'What kind of separation takes place in our minds, that when faced with such an emergency we think that simply more images, more performances about the crisis will make a difference'? They plead for a reclamation of art's ancient power, 'its magical capacity to transform the world by dissolving back into life'. One example of such ambition is the place that Jordan calls home, the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

A barricade at the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. The banner reads: *Against the Aiport and Its World*.

The story of how 4000 acres of wetlands, fields and forests, threatened by the construction of an airport for no less than fifty years, became the fertile grounds from which a major project of autonomy and resistance has flourished, is a story told by many – from academics and journalists, to Zadists themselves. In this adventure to investigate the ecological possibilities of a reclamation of aesthetics, I would like to pay attention to a small selection of first-hand testimonies from occupants of the ZAD, given across three different short-films: 'Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: the ZAD' (2017), 'Notre Flamme des Landes: The Illegal Lighthouse Against an Airport and Its World' (2021), and 'Rear Window: Zone À Défendre' (2017).

Jordan (2018) wrote during one of the attempts from the French state to evict the occupiers: 'there are over a thousand people on the ZAD at the moment and every one of them could tell a different story'. Gathering a rich multiplicity of people of varied social backgrounds – such as farmers, villagers, activists, naturalists, squatters, trade unionists, artists, and people affected by the justice system – perhaps what is most surprising is how the ZAD has maintained a powerfully united force 'against the airport and its world', while simultaneously enabling and nurturing a wide diversity of voices, collectives, and ecologies. One of the protesters living at the ZAD at the time of filming, says to the camera:

The consequence of this diversity is that you can't have one model of doing things. (…) And to me that is one of the dimensions that is as fascinating as it is infuriating. (…) You don't impose a model. There is an

attempt to make decisions in many different variations of consensus. (Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: the ZAD, 2017)

As stated in the collectively authored blog ZAD Forever (no date), the ZAD is a concrete attempt at taking back control of everyday life. With its functioning bakeries, pirate radio station, tractor repair workshop, brewery, banqueting hall, medicinal herb gardens, rap studio, dairy farms, vegetable plots, weekly newpaper, flour mill, library, and 20-meter-tall lighthouse, this autonomous, self-organising 'aesthetic machine' (Savransky, 2024) requires a radically pluralist type of fuel to run. At several instances in the films, residents mention the management of conflict, and indeed this seems to be an important role that people can take on the ground. But conflict and difference don't seem to be taken as obstacles to the collective mission of the ZAD, instead, there appears to be an acceptance – in fact, protection – of difference. Like with Patrice Maniglier's (2020, p.12) claim that 'The Earth is one – but not the same', the ZAD, as a movement, must contend with multiple worlds-within-worlds, and this is the case with regards to the human collectives that co-habit the territory as well as the more-than-human assemblages that have historically constituted the land. This includes negotiations concerning how to live, eat, and die with others, taking into account divergent manners of being and heterogeneous political sensibilities (Savransky, 2024, p.10). In this sense, the ZAD effectively embodies aesthetics outside the confines of universal truths and modes of valuation, instead 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) and generating its own value-ecologies in a tentacular, ongoing, generative web.

We defend ourselves through building (…) even knowing that maybe everything is going to be destroyed.
(Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: the ZAD, 2017)

It is a bit of a schizophrenic dimension because we're both preparing for an eviction and, at the same time, a long-term future.
(Rear Window: Zone À Défendre, 2017)

Not only the ZAD generates pluralist value-ecologies in the face of the ecological collapses caused by capitalism and neoliberalism, but it does so while contending with the very real threat of its own ending. As documented in 'Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart' (2017), military operations attempting to evict the protesters have been met with unyielding resistance, with 40,000 protesters assembling to re-build the buildings lost and re-occupy the territory. The unwavering resilience of the movement means that the lack of security, safety and stability is not a deterrent for action. As an experiment in 'unsafe operating space' (Wakefield, 2020), the ZAD movement upholds a truly pragmatist approach: pursuing an always risky and always incomplete experimentation, asking at every step of the way, as William James (2004) put it, 'what difference will it make'? Does the world, with our additions, rise or fall in value? By repeatedly re-building the plural homes and modes of living the state authorities insist on demolishing, the ZAD inhabitants and supporters collectively practice a resilient 'art of consequences' (Stengers, 2009), accepting at every turn that 'it is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through' (James, 2004).

Everything we do, everything we defend, and everything we resist is about climate change, without having to label it that way. When you fight against the consumer-market-state logic and you are trying to organise production and every aspect of life the way we do, in essence this struggle can be seen as a fight against climate change. (Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: the ZAD, 2017)

The labelling of the ZAD with ecological, green, activist or artistic credentials, as we see in the above excerpt, might become redundant because the value-intensities that emanate from its worlds are entirely embedded in the practices, procedures and relationships engendered on the grounds of Notre-Damme-des-Landes. In other words, the values at play do not descend from 'the heights of the sovereign's judgment' (Savransky, 2024), but they are immanently upheld by the inhabitants' ways of living, of organising themselves, of relating to one another and to the place that they inhabit, of experimenting with new and improvised forms of sociality and world-making. As such, the values of the ZAD are as situated, specific and concrete as the practices that permeate its particular modes of existence.

Sometimes we do totally crazy things at the ZAD. Now we are going to pick up an electricity pylon. It's funny, I had always dreamt of cutting down a pylon. I never thought I would be moving a pylon tens of kilometres, onto an autonomous zone, to build a lighthouse.
(Lighthouse Against an Airport and Its World, 2021)

It's the only place where you can think of anything that is totally delirious, and, as long as you have the energy to carry it forward, it will happen. (Rear Window: Zone À Défendre, 2017)

These testimonies, and the films that they are a part of, make apparent that the ZAD's alternative and unprecedented modes of feeling and world-making are truly 'infectious' (Stengers, 2011, cited in Debaise, 2017). Documenting an adventure that is always carried out with others, they portray a commitment not only to a decolonisation of territory but also of the imagination – with a uniquely pluralist assemblage of bodies, architectures, strategies and networks igniting new forms of thinking and living together on precarious terrain. In some of the scenes, you can see people dancing, singing, laughing together. In others, they are facing violence from the authorities, locking arms in collective resistance, putting their bodies at risk in sheer determination. Often, they are building, hammering, ploughing, kneading bread, tending cattle, exchanging skills. In every case, one gets the sense that living in the ZAD is an experience that is intensely felt, 'infused with speculative energies' (Demos, 2020, p.173), reinventing the borders and boundaries of what sensing and being can be. If Nietzsche has shown us that we have the values that we deserve according to our ways of life, then the ZAD is a testament to the possibilities of new collective modes of appraisal, exploding aesthetics and reclaiming plural arts of living inside and in spite of our anaesthetised capitalist worlds. As Jordan (2021, p.397) puts it, 'it is a crack that lets in some light in these dark times'.

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