Painting a Movement: The Importance of Ecoaesthetics and the Necessity of Art Activism in the Environmental Movement

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Abstract: In 1871, Thomas Moran, an American landscape painter, created The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, a painting that only a year later inspired President Ulysses S. Grant to preserve Yellowstone as the world’s first national park. Eco-aesthetics and environmental moralism continue to be intertwined today just as they were then, as aesthetics continue to affect how much people care about environmental policy and decision making and what aspects they most care about. In my project, I explore this connection in relation to art activism and how it affects art activism’s place in the environmental movement.

Introduction: Storytelling, through words, sounds, images, etc. is an integral part of politics and a necessary part in pulling people into awareness on issues that affect them and others. Often looking only at raw data is not enough to spur people to act. This is why the use of art in activism can be so effective across movements and causes in inciting urgency and the need for change. Over the last several decades, the environmental movement has been working to affect policy and culture change largely surrounding issues of conservation of the natural world. A large part of the work of the environmental movement has especially involved education and working to gain public support for environmental issues, and aesthetics have played a great role in garnering that support. Indeed, the implementation of our national park system was largely motivated by the beauty, the aesthetics, of those areas, brought to the attention of the public and government through landscape paintings. I found an extensive body of research connecting the aesthetics of nature to environmental ethics and sought to discover what this could mean for environmental activism today.

Results: I found in my research that there is an aesthetic imperative that people respond to in environmental art that translates to environmental activist art. This does not necessarily mean that environmental activist art needs to be beautiful to inspire action, but rather that environmental activist art makes us aware of threats to the beauty of the natural world, which we feel a moral duty to protect. It is connected to what Holmes Rolston calls the “light-in-the-refrigerator” ethic. He refers to it as using aesthetics as the ethical force to open the refrigerator door, thus turning on the light revealing more moral imperatives to drive concern such as respect for life and the intrinsic value of biotic communities. When we open that door using the aesthetics of environmental activist art a light turns on so that we can see the emotional connection to the natural world we have driving us that has been hiding in the dark, behind facts and figures we may not feel the same connection to.

Conclusion: Art activism is not only a helpful tool for the environmental movement, but a necessary one. In the movement’s efforts to pursue change by influencing social norms, art is a necessary tool to increase our collective environmental empathy, which leads to changes in collective behavior through the formation of a collective identity. We can see manifestations of this in the rise of “green” living and “green” products. Some people simply focus on their individual impact but many who live green lifestyles tend to become involved in collective environmental action. The aesthetic imperative spur people to want to protect the environment, and other moral imperatives keep them in the fight. Facts and figures and the dissemination of accurate information are, of course, important. Too much of an emphasis on aesthetics can cause a problem when we only want to save what we consider beautiful, for example, beaches and mountains, and ignore what we do not consider beautiful, for example, wetlands and prairies. Art can’t be the only tool but is necessary to use to inspire action and change cultural norms and thought processes on how the environment should be treated and protected. Organizations in the environmental movement, like the Sierra Club and the Sunrise Movement, should use this tool by promoting environmental artists and incorporating environmental art and aesthetics into their education initiatives.

Methods and Research Design: In carrying out my research on the role of art in environmental activism I took a four-pronged approach:
1. I explored the place of art in activism and political art in a more general way. In this stage I read books and articles examining the subject and visited museum exhibits of various artists, such as the Andy Warhol exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago, that either included examples of art activism or included pieces of art that could be considered political.
2. I explored the history of art in the environmental movement, looking especially at environmental philosophers like Eugene Hargrove, J. Baird Callicott, Holmes Rolston, and Allan Carlson, through whom I learned more about the connection between aesthetics and ethics in environmentalism.
3. I explored the impact of environmental art on the environmental movement, how environmental art has been able to aid in shifting perspectives and lead to changes in legislation.
4. I synthesized what I had learned, acknowledging the trends I saw throughout my research to come to a conclusion on the place I believe art has as a tool of the environmental movement.

References:

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