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Between Earth and World: Heidegger on Turrell, Nature, and Aesthetic Intelligibility

> *[Art] makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos... It purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity, which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.*
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> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 1821[1]

On 29 August 2016, a major UK newspaper glumly announced that we have entered into the Anthropocene, a period of human history characterised by the influence human activity has had on nature.[2] Whatever the scientific veracity of this designation, the self-comprehension of our relation to nature implied by the popularisation of this concept points to the need for a new understanding of nature itself. If we can no longer rely on traditional definitions of nature as that which is independent of the human, we seem to require a new paradigm for understanding the natural. We are, in other words, in the sphere of post-nature, to use a phrase recently popularised by theorists such as Bruno Latour.[3]

When, furthermore, the onset of the Anthropocene is seen as resulting in negative effects on the environment, then the aforementioned paradigm takes on a normative or explicitly ethical tinge. For example, a frequent imperative is to abandon the anthropocentric conception under which nature is viewed as possessing a merely instrumental value and instead to move toward a conception, for example, that sees inherent value in nature. This dual aspect of the question of post-nature—what nature *is*, and what attitude we *should* adopt toward it—is packaged into the task that the Anthropocene seems to set for us.

Perhaps partly because of its creative potential, and partly because it is seen as a possible counterweight to the instrumentalisation of nature, artistic production and discourse has become more and more engaged in the attempts to both fill the aforementioned definitional vacuum and to disclose alternative ethical norms for our relation to nature. Specifically, current approaches often argue that Land Art or otherwise self-consciously environmental art is able to forge new concepts of nature and foster more harmonious relationships to the non-human in general. However, seen against the backdrop of philosopher Martin Heidegger's later reflections on nature and art, we argue that such attempts are beset by serious internal tensions. Namely, these approaches paradoxically further contribute to—rather than alleviate—the instrumentalisation of nature. We further argue that the work of the American artist James Turrell embodies an alternative artistic approach to the question of post-nature, which can avoid some of the internal tensions mentioned

above, and can open up new and potentially fruitful horizons for approaching art, nature, and the environment.

The Aestheticisation of Nature and the Ethicisation of Art

Popularised during the 1960s and 70s, Land Art takes natural landscapes as means and sites for its production. Due to its proximity to the natural, Land Art is often taken as an exemplary in its potential to provide insight into the concept of nature and our relation to it. For instance, environmental philosopher Emily Brady argues that Land Art is able both to foster an «aesthetic regard for nature» as well as to forge a «more positive relationship between humans and nature».[4] On the aesthetic front, she argues, works by artists such as the British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy, encourage aesthetic appreciation of the environment by pointing to, highlighting, and working creatively with «nature's qualities».[5] In this sense, such works lead us to «value the natural environment aesthetically» by providing an appreciation of nature that is «more on nature's terms» than on the artist's.[6] Land art is thus seen as possessed of the capability to promote a paradigm for understanding nature as an object of aesthetic value rather than of mere manipulation and exploitation.

The weight of Brady's arguments, however, rests on the ethical. Works such as the American land artist Robert Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), the site for which was chosen by the artist partly due to the evidence of the effects of human actions, are said to draw attention to «human impact on nature» and bring out «the non-instrumental value of nature» in a way that engenders «a type of respect for nature».[7] In a similar spirit, art historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos argues that ecological art can contest «the anthropocentrism of instrumental reason» and disclose «newly egalitarian ways of being-in-the-world».[8] Specifically, the research-exhibition *Rights of Nature* (2015) at Nottingham Contemporary, which he co-curated, is said to challenge «Western epistemologies» by endowing nonhuman objects with rights in a way that seeks to «protect the cohesion of ecosystems that support the world's biodiversity».[9] The exhibition explores the extinction of species, global warming, and the destruction of the environment provoked by our «fraught relationship with nature» through the work of 20 artists invited to explore The Amazon, The Andes, The Artic and the Gulf of Mexico, among other regions.[10] The thought is that these artworks—among them photos of caribou migrants in Alaska by Subhankar Banerjee; animatronic Monarch butterflies by Fernando Palma Rodríguez; or plant drawings by Abel Rodríguez that document the environmental knowledge of indigenous peoples that has circulated through generations—are able to convey an ethics of harmony and respect towards nature that is characteristic of the indigenous communities, thus leading to a transformation of our own (Western) exploitative practices towards nature.

While the former line of argumentation attempts to aestheticise nature by revealing it as an object of aesthetic value, this latter line ethicises the artwork by demanding that it paint nature as an object imbued with ethical value. In this latter sense, as Brady asks, «if art can mediate positive relationships between humans and nature, why not encourage that?».[11] However, the above approach seems to conceal a paradox, namely: if it is generally agreed that the devastation of nature was the result of the instrumental rationality of means-ends thinking, then it seems highly problematic that the solution to such devastation can be effected by the same means-end thinking represented by the *if-then* form of Brady's rhetorical

question above. In other words, to claim that the *means* in the form of Land Art are justified by the *ends* in the form of a ‹positive relationship between humans and nature›, formally seems to be just another expression of the same instrumental reasoning about nature against which ethical conceptions of art react.

Art, Nature and Value in the Metaphysical World Picture

The roots of this apparent paradox, we shall argue, can be explained when examined in the context of Heidegger's critique of metaphysical thinking. For Heidegger, changing our relation to nature cannot consist in merely exchanging our Western epistemology for a more nature-friendly one, as Demos implies. Rather, both our epistemological framework and the resulting understanding of nature supervene upon a deeper level that delineates the possibilities and limits of the former. Specifically, for Heidegger, it is the modern metaphysical picture of the world that is decisive in determining the paradigm in which our possible relations to nature unfold, and so any transformation of the latter must be grounded in a revision of the former.

What is the metaphysical picture of the world in modernity—the modern world-view—which Heidegger believes ultimately leads to the «devastation of the earth»?[12] For Heidegger, our metaphysical picture of the world is, in short, one in which the world is understood *as picture*. Having a world picture is the result of a particular understanding of «beings as whole», one, specifically, in which «man becomes the referential centre of beings» and, conversely, «a being is first and only in being insofar as it is set in place by representing-producing humanity».[13] Within such a framework, as subjects of represent*ing* humans take on a privileged place with respect to the possibility of determining which beings count as beings, and non-human beings become mere objects represent*ed* by and for us—in other words, the world appears *as a picture* of and for our representational faculties.

Because our metaphysical world picture pervades the very manner in which the world is disclosed for us, it determines not only our epistemology in general but also our specific manner in which nature, art, and culture can become an object for us. As Heidegger writes, «from this objectification, which is at the same time the decision as to what may count as an object, nothing can escape».[14] In this sense, nature *qua* object of representation is disclosed in the context of the ground-plan of a «closed system of spatio-temporally related units of mass» that we project onto it, and so «every natural event must be viewed in such a way that it fits into this ground-plan of nature».[15] In other words, natural beings are disclosed as objects bearing the sets of scientifically measurable spatio-temporal qualities according to which they can be ordered; when man in this manner «ensnares nature as an area of his own conceiving» it is only one short step to seeing the entirety of the contents of the natural world as a resource or ‹standing reserve›.[16] As Heidegger evocatively writes in 1977:

> Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example; uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be released either for destruction or for peaceful use.... Even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command.... The river is dammed up into the power plant and... is now [merely] a water power supplier.[17]

We may still, Heidegger concedes, take the Rhine as a landscape, but we will do so merely «as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry»[18] – in other words, the river becomes a resource for providing

leisure experience, but a resource nonetheless. Thus, within the subjectivistic framework of our metaphysical world picture that in turn objectivises all beings, nature appears as a mere resource to be controlled, manipulated, or enjoyed.

This is in line with, at least in tone, much contemporary environmental writing broadly construed, including that of the authors referred to above. However, Heidegger further argues that the metaphysical world-picture not only naturalises our conception of nature, but also aestheticises our conception of art and ethicises our understanding of our practices. Much in the same way nature is objectified by and for us, the artwork is also «posited as the ‹object› for a ‹subject›», an object, specifically, that is supposed to provide us with an aesthetic ‹feeling› or experience.[19] Thus, in the manner that the Rhine becomes an object for us to the extent that it is disclosed as resource for providing leisure experiences, the artwork too comes to be «examined and evaluated on the basis of its capacity to produce the aesthetic state».[20] While the Rhine becomes a resource within the energy industry or the tourist industry, art comes to be disclosed as a component of «the art industry», which provides pleasurable objects to consumers of art.[21]

Seen in this light, Brady's arguments that Land Art can provide us with an aesthetic appreciation of nature turns out to be an expression of the very metaphysics that underpins the processes that lead to the devastation of nature in the first place: in the aestheticising framework, nature is posited as an object for us and ultimately colonised by the art industry for our aesthetic enjoyment. However, Brady and Demos' arguments are also ethical in import: they state that art can deliver the right sets of values, be it harmonious relation or respect for the rights of nature. Nevertheless, seen against the background of Heidegger's analysis, the ethicising attitude that attempts to imbue nature with value is as hopelessly intertwined with the metaphysical world-picture as the naturalising and aestheticising ones.

In a text that has become something of a manifesto against anthropocentric thinking, *The Letter on Humanism* from 1949, Heidegger argues that «by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation».[22] In other words, our projection of values onto objects is merely a makeshift attempt to compensate for the «loss of being» that occurs when beings become objects of representation and, ultimately, mere resources for us. For this reason, Heidegger can state that the attempt to endow objects with value is merely the «threadbare mask of the objectification of beings» symptomatic our metaphysical world picture.[23]

The complicity of what Heidegger calls ‹value-thinking› with the metaphysical world picture is particularly apparent in Demos' paradoxical attempt to interpret the artworks presented in the exhibition *Rights of Nature* as a vehicle for the transmission of non-Western, indigenous epistemologies of nature by means of that most Western of concepts, that of ‹rights›. Because the idea of the rights of man is in some sense the crowning achievement of the kind of ‹value-thinking› described above, and the latter is merely an outgrowth of the metaphysical world picture, Demos' attempt to extend rights to non-human objects remains caught up in the very same logic that elevates man over nature in the first place. As environmental philosopher Michael E. Zimmerman puts it, «the doctrine of rights for nonhuman beings does not escape» the orbit of subjectivism, and for this reason a «nonanthropocentric conception of humanity and its relation to nature must go beyond the doctrine of rights».[24]

James Turrell—the Revelatory Power of Light and the Deconstruction of the Object

From the perspective of Heidegger's critique of the metaphysical world picture, then, the joint attempts to aestheticise nature through ethicising the artwork appear as a further instrumentalisation not only of nature itself but equally of art. Nonetheless, it is clear from Heidegger's account that nature and art are related in an intimate way. If art can be neither a resource endowing nature with aesthetic value nor a medium on which to project our ethical values, however, how are we then to view the relation between art and nature? Can art tell us something about nature in a post-natural paradigm, and if so what? Though, as should be clear, there are no quick answers, in what follows we examine the work of James Turrell as a case study that attempts to bring some of these questions into focus.

Turrell, active since the mid-1960s, is associated to the Light and Space movement in South California that gained importance in the same decade, and whose proponents were concerned with light, perception and spectatorship. Turrell's work touches upon a diverse range of artistic concerns, which are simultaneously and paradoxically intrinsic, peripheral and—to a certain extent—marginal to the history of art in its most traditional understanding. For instance, his *Skyspaces* (as of 2013 more than 80 *Skyspaces* have been installed worldwide)[25] speak of the minimalist concern with site-specificity: they are sky-viewing chambers that respond to the specific kind of light (during the day or during the night) that emanates from the skies where these works are located. Yet, the *Skyspaces* recoup aspects of the pre-historic (and certainly pre-art historical) understanding of the interplay between the natural and the non-natural, what archaeologists and anthropologists today call *archaeoastronomy*.

Some of his mid- and late career gallery pieces—the *Ganzfelds*, for instance—bring to mind Rothko's colour-field painting. Art historian Claire Bishop describes *Arhirit*—an installation of four *Ganzfelds* in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1976)—as coloured rooms in which the light entered through a space located high on the wall. Before entering the space, the light reflected a green lawn or red bricks located outside of the gallery, illuminating the white spaces in different colours. Bishop recalls how the subtle colouring of the interiors «was exaggerated in intensity by the sequencing of the rooms, so that the after-colour of one gallery space lingered on the retina to make its complement even stronger».[26] Rather than apprehending an object, as in Mark Rothko's case, Turrell's *Ganzfelds* confront the viewer with the impossibility of subsuming the work under an objective representation. As Bishop puts it, «the extreme effects of these colour fields frustrate our ability to reflect on our own perceptions: subject and object are elided in a space that cannot be plumbed by vision».[27]

Turrell's work poses a challenge to more traditional art historical representations or portrayals of nature, which are concerned with using light as that which illuminates objects, landscapes, or people. If we consider Antonio Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1599–1600), Jesus' inviting presence illuminates the mundane world of tax collectors through a beam of light. Impressionists, for their part, were not only concerned with capturing light as that which illuminates different landscapes or buildings, but also in capturing the immediacy of nature and its processes at different moments in time, under different lights—think of Claude Monet's depictions of sunrises and sunsets. Turrell's artistic production treats light neither as a subject matter, as something that illuminates objects, nor as that which

captures the processes of nature. Instead, he is concerned with the revelation of light, bringing into the foreground the illuminating itself.

In this manner, Turrell's work hovers between the objective, the pre-objective and the un-objectifiable, challenging our familiar understanding of the relation between what is present and objectivity. For Turrell, other artists make their work out of something, whereas he is «making something out of a thing we don't normally attribute thingness to».[28] In thematising the manner in which light can become an object for us in ways not easily subsumable under standard understandings of objectivity, Turrell's work explores the possible ways in which beings can be present for us outside of their objective manifestations. As he puts it, «in terms of questioning what is something that is, what makes this object quality, I deal with that issue, whereas most artists just assume it».[29] By merely utilizing light to provide a perspective on already-formed objects, the history of art has left unquestioned the metaphysical presupposition that beings can only be present in their objectivity, a presupposition Turrell's work brings to the foreground.

Some of Turrell's built environments owe in scale to Land Art since they also take natural landscapes as means and sites for their production. This brings some of his works closest to the kinds of works that Brady discusses, as seen earlier. *Roden Crater*, which he started in the late 1970s and is still a work in progress (as for 2017), is considered to be the artists' most ambitious work. In this built-environment, his life-long groundwork and research experiments with light explored in *Skyspaces*, *Ganzfelds*, and other work series all come together under the clear skies of the Painted Dessert in the southwest of the U.S. For this work, Turrell wanted to create a large-scale naked-eye observatory using a volcano and its natural surroundings. Consulting with astronomers, and after extensively flying all over the Western states looking for sites that provided the right conditions (hemispherically-shaped space, high altitude, blue sky), he purchased a piece of land at the Painted Desert, near Flagstaff, Arizona in 1979, on which he soon started working. The shape of the crater and the surroundings remain untouched, appearing fully integrated with the desert's landscape. However, the artist has internally transformed the space. The cinder is divided into spaces including tunnels and apertures that allow the spectator to confront light in a variety of contexts (including similar experiences to those of *Skyspaces* and *Ganzfelds*): light coming from the outside at different times of the day, light that is reflected, changing and stable lights emanating from the tunnels, and internal lights responding to outside light. Turrell does not countenance a distinction between ‹artificial light› (e.g. that in gallery spaces used to illuminate) and the ‹natural light› emanating from the sky, since at the level at which the world is first revealed subjectivity has not yet been separated out from its objects: at this level, «there isn't any difference because in light everything reveals what it is».[30] Because Turrell's works «eliminate all that we could call an ‹object› situated as distinct from ourselves»,[31] as Bishop puts it, they also undercut the possibility of dividing up the world and classifying it into natural and artificial objects.

The Withdrawal of the Familiar: Before and After Nature

Roden Crater is thus not well-suited to serve as a vehicle for conveying ethical attitudes towards natural objects; instead, it disrupts the very ways in which what we encounter can become an object for us in the first place. Turrell's light is not

revealed as an object of use embedded into my network of pragmatically-structured ‹in-order-to› relations, in the way that for example I use my table lamp *in order to* see the text in my book *in order* that I can read it comfortably, and so forth. Nor is the light disclosed within the context of scientific theory, as objectivised into a particle or a wave the behaviour of which can be measured and controlled. Rather, Turrell's light appears stripped of all significance, torn out from my familiar contexts of intelligibility, de-worlded, even uncanny. In Bishop's apt phrase, Turrell's works «orphan us from the world».[32]

The light in Turrell's works thus resists objectification according to our familiar categories because it withdraws from the context of significance in which those categories are meaningfully applied, and instead occupies a sphere prior to the integration of beings into the intelligibility of our world. Heidegger designates this peculiar sphere between the subject and the object as the ‹the between›, ‹the earth›, or simply ‹the nothing›. What is revealed in the work of art is ‹Das Nichts›, the nothing, which is «never [mere] nothing, and neither is it a something in the sense of an object».[33] Following Heidegger's analysis of object, *Gegenstand,* what Turrell's works place *gegen* cannot be brought to a *Stand* by the application of customary concepts that could integrate it into our familiar world. Thus, while reflection on post-nature often proceeds by asking what new conceptual clothing we can drape over natural objects *after* nature, Turrell's works pose the question of what comes *before* the conceptualisation of beings into the objects of nature that populate our world picture.

It is precisely because the work of art can place itself outside of our metaphysical world picture that we are struck by the feeling unfamiliarity, of being orphaned in the world, of the ‹annihilation› of our familiar universe, in Shelley's words quoted above. We can now read Heidegger's assertion, cited above, that from the objectification of our metaphysical world picture «nothing can escape» in not merely a negative light—it is precisely ‹the nothing› that is revealed in the work of art *can* escape our drive for objectification. It is in this sense, by placing itself outside of the metaphysical framework in which the beings of our surroundings become naturalised—and thus in some sense prior to nature—that Turrell's work establishes a viewpoint from which to pose the question of (post-) nature.

Anmerkungen

1 Percy Bysshe Shelley, «A Defence of Poetry», in: *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald Reiman, New York, 2002, p. 533.
2 The Guardian, website, 2016,https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth, accessed on 28 January 2017.
3 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*, Cambridge Mass 2004.
4 Emily Brady, «Aesthetic Regard for Nature in Environmental and Land Art» in: *Ethics Place and Environment*, 2007, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 287–300, here p. 287.
5 Ibid., p. 292.
6 Ibid., pp. 297/298.
7 Ibid., pp. 291, 297.
8 TJ Demos, «Rights of Nature: The Art and Politics of Earth Jurisprudence» published by *Nottingham Contemporary*, Nottingham 2015, PDF, p.2 http://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/art/rights-nature, accessed 26 January 2017.
9 Ibid., pp. 2, 5.
10 Rights of Nature, *Nottingham Contemporary*, website, 2015, http://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/art/rights-nature, accessed on 26 January 2017.
11 Brady 2007 (see note 4), p. 296.
12 Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, New York, 1968, p. 30.
13 Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 67/68.
14 Ibid., p. 83.
15 Ibid., p. 60.
16 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, New York, 1977, p. 19.
17 Ibid., pp. 15/16.
18 Ibid.
19 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: The Will to Power as Art*, New York, 1979, p. 78.
20 Ibid., p. 90.
21 Heidegger 2002 (see note 12), p. 20.
22 Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 265.
23 Heidegger 2002 (see note 12), p. 77.
24 Michael Zimmerman, «Toward a Heideggerean Ethos for Radical Environmentalism», in *Environmental Ethics* 1983, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 99–131, here p. 99.
25 For more information and images of the different *Skyspaces* installed worldwide see http://jamesturrell.com/work/type/skyspace/
26 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, New York, 2005, p. 87.
27 Ibid.
28 Elaine A. King, «Into the Light: A Conversation with James Turrell» in: *Sculpture*, 2002, vol. 21, no. 9, http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag02/nov02/turrell/turrell.shtml, accessed 26 January 2017.
29 Ibid.
30 Kathy Halbreich, William Porter and Lois Craig, «An Interview with James Turrell» in: *Places Journal*, 1983, https://placesjournal.org/article/an-interview-with-james-turrell/, accessed 27 January 2017.
31 Bishop 2005 (see note 26), p. 85.
32 Ibid.
33 Heidegger 2002 (see note 12), p. 85.