An Analysis of The Participatory Model of Aesthetics and Japanese Gardens

by

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Abstract

In this essay, I seek to explore and evaluate Arnold Berleant’s participatory model of environmental aesthetics, and see how it might be improved upon. I argue that Berleant’s model is valuable and for the most part accurate, but incorrect in its scope of what ought to be appreciated and lacking in terms of its applications, and that further elaboration upon both is necessary in order to perfect the model. I do this in part by considering the case of Japanese gardens, the design elements behind which allow for a unique perspective on Berleant’s model that apply not only to the gardens themselves, but also more broadly to the way we appreciate environments in general.
Introduction

How glorious a greeting the sun gives the mountains! To behold this alone is worth the pains of any excursion a thousand times over. The highest peaks burned like islands in a sea of liquid shade. Then the lower peaks and spires caught the glow, and long lances of light, streaming through many a notch and pass, fell thick on the frozen meadows.

- John Muir

For the hundred and fifty years after the turn of the nineteenth century, the environment was neglected as a worthwhile candidate for aesthetic appreciation. For many philosophers of aesthetics, genuine beauty required a human creative force to set it in motion. It also implied a designation of existing on its own, separate from the world. Both of these distinctions disqualified environments of all kinds from having aesthetic value. There was some discussion of the topic in the 18th century most notably championed by Kant, but lost favor in the following century and a half. Nonetheless, in the last fifty years there has been a recent resurgence in the study of our environment as a space worthy of aesthetic appreciation. Contemporary writing on the topic has most principally concerned itself with determining what the appropriate method of appreciating the aesthetic value of nature is, and how that differs from appreciation of art. Heavily figuring into this concern is the notion that our environment as a space to aesthetically appreciate is not separate from the space we occupy. We, as inhabitants of the environments we exist inside of, can only accurately appreciate the world around us if we take this fact into consideration.

1 Muir, Mountaineering Essays pg. 36
The primary focus of this essay is Arnold Berleant’s participatory model, which finds aesthetic value in the ways in which we are drawn to interacting with the environment around us. I argue his model to be one especially well conceived for the appreciation of human as well as natural environments, because it is true to and finds value in what our environment’s most defining qualities are: that we exist physically within, as opposed to outside of, our environment, and therefore that it is a space that we interact with in such a way that we have an affect on it, and it on us. For all its strengths, though, there are some points at which the participatory model falters or could be improved upon. In particular, I believe that the participatory model needs to be more specific and discerning about what ought or ought not to be evaluated in virtue of its participatory qualities, and that the implications of understanding the aesthetic value of an environment through the participatory model are similarly in need of elaboration: how does this way of thinking change our perspective on the environment, and how might we make use of it to improve ourselves and the environment we occupy?

I will furthermore discuss two varieties of Japanese garden, the dry landscape garden and stroll garden, and their role within the field of Japanese aesthetics. Japanese aesthetics is distinctive in that rather than attempt to explain why an artistic or natural object is beautiful, it focuses on understanding how art and nature can evoke philosophical concepts, particularly those tied to Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhist thought heavily influences Japanese gardens, and their design principles often consist of visual manifestation or embodiments of a more general idea. For example, the minimally designed and ornamented nature of a Japanese dry landscape garden draws
attention to the rejection of opulence and preference for simplicity that is a key part of
Zen Buddhism. I believe the ideas exhibited within their design and appreciation can
inform how we can improve and expand upon the participatory model not just with
relevance to Japanese gardens, but to our environment as a whole.

In order to demonstrate the merits of Berleant’s participatory model, it will be
helpful to consider the discourse of environmental aesthetics that led to his model,
and how aesthetic understanding of the environment evolved, especially with regards
to what it is about the environment that we appreciate. Below, I will provide a short
overview of the field of environmental aesthetics as it progressed from the late
eighteenth century to the present.

Kant’s Appreciation of the Beauty of Nature

Immanuel Kant was the most prominent of the pre-contemporary philosophers
of aesthetics who considered nature as a serious source of beauty. For Kant, a natural
object such as a flower exemplifies what he describes as a “pure beauty,” and
understands pure beauties to be the simplest, paradigmatic examples of beauty
because they are easiest to abstract from our conceptual understandings of what the
object is. We can therefore most easily appreciate it strictly for its formal qualities.
Kant’s aesthetic theory contends that judgments of beauty are subjective because they
do not make a claim about but the qualities of the thing, but are universal insofar as
the viewer contends that the feeling he experiences in observing a beautiful object is
the one that everyone else ought to experience, too. Due to their lack of intentioned
creation, we are most able to see natural objects in this way. We are not distracted by the creator’s intentions, nor are we concerned with our own attachments or concerns with that object’s “end” or purpose, as might be the case with a chair, a building, or a portrait painting. These are all “adherent beauties” because the our experience of them is constrained or directed by our awareness of what their purpose is, and as such we can’t appreciate them without, to some degree, finding them agreeable, and as such can’t appreciate them in a purely aesthetic fashion.

For Kant, the pleasure we take in beautiful objects is a disinterested one. This means that when we appreciate an object aesthetically, we abstract from any exterior knowledge, including our personal experiences, moral beliefs, or other external knowledge. For example, in appreciating a banana from a disinterested perspective, we are ignoring what we know about the banana being delicious, that all bananas are genetically identical, or moral concerns about the circumstances under which it was produced. We only focus on the formal attributes of the banana such as size, shape, and color.²

The concept of disinterestedness is one that continues to have a strong hold on aesthetic discourse today, as approaching a work of art from a disinterested perspective that disregards the viewer’s biases, preferences, and habits as well as all other forms of exterior knowledge allows for a judgment of the value of the work that is not based on the viewer’s perspective. However, the relevance of disinterestedness is a point of contention within the contemporary field of environmental aesthetics, as

² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 87-120
it requires that we distance ourselves from the environmental or natural object that we seek to aesthetically appreciate, which belies the immersive character of the environment. As we shall see, the imposition of this disinterested technique of appreciation is counter to an understanding of the environment as an occupied space, and will figure heavily in my later discussion of the participatory model.

Decline of the Aesthetics of Nature and 19th Century Naturalism

Despite Kant’s argument that nature is the paradigm of the way we judge beauty, the field of aesthetics evolved to more and more on aesthetic beauty solely as it pertained to art, leading to a dearth of philosophical writing on the topic for the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Georg Hegel significantly argues against Kant in claiming that the beauty of art was not a result of its capacity to replicate what is beautiful about nature, but the unique way it allowed for human expression of higher truths. As such, natural beauty did not figure into his conception of what is beautiful.³

There was not a complete lack of consideration, however, as naturalists such as John Muir explored and vividly wrote about their experiences of the American west. John Muir was notably among the first environmentalists, as the founder and first president of the Sierra Club, an organization devoted to ecological preservation. His essays describing the beauty of the places he explored were so influential that he is credited with having created the environmentalist movement as it exists today. The 1894 essay A Near View of the High Sierra chronicled an 1872 excursion he took

³ Hegel, Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics 3-15
through the Sierra Nevada mountain range. In the essay, he described the beauty of his surroundings in a way that starkly contrasted with the interpretations of nature of philosophers such as Kant, who discusses appreciation of nature as a disinterested, separate observer that seeks to arrive at a judgment of beauty not dependent upon perspective. The naturalist movement as exemplified by Muir saw the areas he wrote about as spaces to be explored, and understood his experiences not from a attitude of the separated observer appreciating the scenic or picturesque qualities of nature in the way of a landscape painter who values a scenic view, but from the viewpoint of one who exists within the landscape. This mode of thought set the tone for the later development within environmental aesthetics of understanding nature as having value not just from a withdrawn perspective observed in the same way as art, but as a space that we occupy and interact with. For Muir, the wilderness is more aesthetically valuable for being a continuous part of our world, not less.

R.W. Hepburn and the Revival of Environmental Aesthetics

Despite the American naturalist movement inciting a substantial public interest in the exploration and preservation of the natural world, the realm of aesthetics remained predominantly concerned with artistic endeavors for the first half of the twentieth century. It wasn’t until R.W. Hepburn published his *Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty* in 1966 that scholarly interest in the topic was renewed. His work not only illuminated the reasons why aesthetics had turned a blind eye to natural beauty, but the reasons why a consideration of the aesthetic value of nature would be worthwhile.
Hepburn observed that nature, in the modern era, had been thought of as something that was “indifferent, unmeaning, and ‘absurd’” with relation to humanity, which he contrasted with a previous view of nature existing as “man’s educator.” The natural world’s former role as a provider of knowledge and resources for humanity had been supplanted with a notion of it existing counter to humanity’s prosperity, as a foreign entity that evokes aversion in an observer. He goes on to discuss the related ways in which aesthetic appreciation of nature and art might differ, and explicitly comments that these differences are not negative, but may actually positively contribute to the aesthetic value of nature.

The first is that we as humans don’t exist separately from the natural world. Unlike our relationship with a piece of art, which has a clear demarcation between viewer and viewed, we are enveloped and immersed in the world, and can’t separate ourselves from it. We experience ourselves in a different way in natural environments, and that this different sense of ourselves figures into our aesthetic understanding of a natural environment. Second, natural environments lack an aesthetic frame that delineates what is and is not relevant to our aesthetic experience of that environment. Whereas it is clear that a frame that holds a painting separates what is and is not part of the work, and the previews immediately preceding a movie ought not to affect your experience of the movie, it is far more difficult to ascertain the barrier between what is and is not relevant to the aesthetic experience of our environment. In appreciating a yellowthroat’s song, is it necessary to consider that the

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4 Hepburn, *Neglect of Natural Beauty*, p. 521
5 Ibid., p. 523
sound source moves around as the bird flies? In viewing a sunset, is the landscape the
sun is setting over (a city, a forest, an ocean, etc.) relevant when the colors of the
setting sun would be equally visible from any location? There is no simple way to
discern where to draw the line between irrelevant and relevant. Hepburn sees this as
at once complicating and liberating. While having someone walk in front of you
while you are viewing a painting only serves to distract from the experience, a hawk
breaking up an otherwise static view of a vista can enrich it. However, determining
what is aesthetically relevant must be determined in a more context-appropriate way,
and the onus is largely passed to the viewer at that moment. As such, the aesthetic
experience of nature is somewhat more spontaneous, he claims, than that of art.

Hepburn’s essay reinvigorated a field of aesthetics that has many questions to
be answered, and his concerns continue to shape contemporary discussion of
aesthetics of natural as well as human environments. But in light of these new criteria
for understanding how the aesthetic qualities of our environments differ from those of
art, we return to the big question: how do we appreciate our environment
aesthetically?

Art-Based Theories of Environmental Aesthetics

Following Hepburn’s initial questions of how to discern what to appreciate in
nature and how to appreciate it, Allen Carlson was among the first to more
elaborately compare existing theories of art-based aesthetics and how they might

6 Hepburn, *Neglect of Natural Beauty* 523
apply to nature. In his essay *Appreciation and the Natural Environment*, he considers environmental aesthetics by way of two art-based models of aesthetic understanding, each of which pertains to specific aspects of nature: the object and landscape models.

The object model envisions individual natural objects as being roughly equivalent to pieces of abstract sculpture. For example, in appreciating an interestingly shaped stone, we might focus solely on its formal qualities of shape and size; or dwelling on the way that a tree’s branches divide and spread in order to create a canopy. Considering a particular “piece” of the environment in this sense dictates that we view it in one of two ways: either we view it in a context separate from its surroundings, or we view it within the context of its surroundings. For example, we can appreciate an interesting stone while it is resting on our mantle, far away from the beach where it was found, or we can do so at the beach, considering the space around it as relevant. The former allows us to determine what exactly to appreciate but ignores the larger context of the environment from which the object came to be, which he claims is especially relevant for natural objects. Meanwhile, the latter abandons the pretext of understanding the object on its own, which is the crux of the object model. Neither method is sufficient, he concludes.

The imposition of strict barriers between what is and is not the object importantly contradicts the way in which Hepburn characterizes nature as having an amorphous, frameless attribute that allows for a freer contemplation of nature. A natural thing understood and appreciated as a discrete object has been removed from

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7 Carlson *Appreciation and the Natural Environment* 536
its surroundings, and to consider a rock or a tree’s shape only as a self-contained thing disregards the way in which nature exists as a continuous whole, and to arbitrarily insert such boundaries detracts from the object’s naturalness. The landscape model, though, does a better job of encompassing the environment’s vastness.

The landscape model is one that translates our understanding of works of art that depict natural scenes, particularly landscape paintings, onto the appreciation of actual natural scenes. Under the landscape model, we have the same type of experience when viewing a painting of a particular vista that we do actually viewing the vista, and appreciate it as if it were a painting or photograph. Not only is this beneficial in that it provides an existing set of criteria for appreciating nature, such as color and design (the same aspects that are applicable to landscape painting), but the perspective of a scenic point that looks over the Grand Canyon, for example, makes it clear what is and is not relevant. Details too distant or small to see such as rocks on the canyon’s bottom are not considered, nor are things too near, such as the ground underfoot, are not part of the scenic view being observed, since appreciating a landscape in this way dictates a “due distance.”

This notion of picturesque or scenic natural beauty is perhaps the most conventional notion of beauty in nature, and has led to valuation of vast, impressive natural features like the Grand Canyon; the landscape model might also be construed as the method of aesthetic appreciation in use for modern tourism, with the

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8 Carlson, Appreciation and the Natural Environment 538
9 Ibid.
prevalence of scenic viewpoints and lookouts allowing for an all-encompassing scenic view at distance. But therein lies the rub. In viewing nature from a static, removed point, the three dimensional, ephemeral, and enveloping character of nature is discarded in favor of a very specific type of beauty. John Muir’s *A Near View of the High Sierra* illustrates this well: there is no picturesque aspect to much of nature, and to only find aesthetic value in those parts of nature that are disregard much of the natural world that nonetheless has beauty in a way that is less related to art. The landscape model, just like the object model, transforms the environment into something that it is not: in this case, into a faraway scene that does not evoke the way in which we are constantly surrounded by it.

In discussing the weaknesses of these two models, Carlson reaches two important if obvious conclusions about the natural environment: that it is an environment, and that it is natural. What he means by this is that in order to appreciate nature appropriately, we have to appreciate it as it actually exists, and the landscape and object models mischaracterize nature in these two key ways. The landscape model in particular fails to interpret nature as being an environment that we exist inside of, but imposes a distance between viewer and viewed that precludes the surrounding quality of the natural environment, which Carlson argues is integral to its aesthetic experience. Similarly, the natural environment must be considered in light of its being natural. In utilizing the object model to appreciate a natural object and focusing only on the formal qualities of this discrete thing, we are ignoring the context in which it was made, which is to say, by nature. In other words, in order to
appreciate a particular aspect of nature, we must likewise be aware of its existence, origin, and character as a natural thing.

Malcolm Budd and “As Nature”

In light of the problems that appropriating extant art-centric aesthetic models poses, it is clear that a different approach is needed. Ronald Hepburn and Allen Carlson’s understanding of the natural environment require an aesthetic model that differs from existing aesthetic models that pertain to art insofar as they account for the environment’s all-encompassing and indefinite nature. Malcolm Budd elaborates on how we might accommodate this in his essay The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature as Nature, in which he seeks to demonstrate that the most important thing to consider in a model of environmental aesthetics is that it appreciates the natural environment in a way that acknowledges its naturalness. As art necessitates being evaluated as art, he claims, nature must be evaluated as nature\textsuperscript{10}. He argues for the stronger of the two possible readings of this claim: the natural environment must be seen as valuable explicitly because it is natural, as opposed to artefactual.\textsuperscript{11} The weaker reading of this claim, wherein we need only ignore the possibility of an object or scene being man-made, can equally apply to natural and artefactual things, whereas

\textsuperscript{10} Budd, Appreciation of Nature as Nature 5
\textsuperscript{11} What Budd means exactly by “artefactual” is a bit murky: he says that a natural object should be viewed in opposition to “not what is man made but to what is artefactual (a work of human artifice) (4).” It seems by this definition he intends to exclude something like a human being (man-made, in a literal sense) but include a flower arrangement, for example, which consists of natural elements but is “stamped with human activity (3).”
the stronger reading necessitates that the object of appreciation be of natural origin. For example, a smooth stone that we cannot positively identify as being the product of millennia of ocean waves or a few hours of manual polishing and shaping would be difficult to appreciate under Budd’s model, because it requires that we are able to appreciate the object’s naturalness, which in this situation is ambiguous.

Budd takes his preferred focus of appreciating nature as nature too far in two ways. The first is that it serves as an unsatisfying half-solution to the problem of what is aesthetically valuable about the environment. Budd rightly claims that the term “nature” refers to so many things that engage our senses in so many ways that there’s no way to appreciate all of it with one theory or method: there is no logical single method of aesthetics of nature. Nevertheless, he sees this as a benefit, not a problem to be solved. In fact, he characterizes this lack of any one best method as a type of “freedom” in appreciating the aesthetics of nature as what is so valuable about environmental aesthetics in general: the viewer may select his preferred method of selecting what is valuable about a given environment, as well as how to appreciate it, as opposed to an artwork, where some knowledge about the thing perceived is required in order to properly appreciate it (for example, that actors in a play are in fact actors and not ordinary people unaware the room they are in is missing a wall), no such special knowledge is required to appreciate nature. A natural environment, he contends, does not require such knowledge of what is and is not aesthetically relevant because it’s up to the viewer to include or exclude any possibly relevant aspect as they see fit. Similarly, it is also up to the viewer to decide in what way they wish to

\[12 \text{ Ibid., 146-148}\]
appreciate the natural object they are viewing; Budd concludes that the free, undefined character of nature is best appreciated in a way that is decided by the viewer as he or she experiences it\textsuperscript{13}.

In saying that the best way to appreciate the environment is ‘however you want,’ rather than answer (or attempt to answer) the question of what and how to best appreciate the environment, Budd sidesteps the issue. But instead of attempting to lump all manifestations of nature, from a blade of grass to a constellation, into one category and applying one model (if the term still applies to Budd’s conception) to it, a model of environmental aesthetics ought to be specific about what environmental features it can critique in order to more satisfyingly realize the value of what we are looking at. Budd’s argument suggests that the landscape model, while flawed, is an acceptable method of understanding the landscape\textsuperscript{14}, and would furthermore also be an acceptable method of understanding a stone. Though it is possible to observe a stone from a perspective of due distance as in the landscape model, it is often not advisable; at the distance we observe a landscape, the details of the stone would be lost. When we consider this, it becomes clear that certain models of environmental aesthetics can be more appropriate for some situations than others, which discounts his claim that the correct manner of aesthetic appreciation of the environment is “whatever manner it is possible.” Once again, I argue that a model or models of environmental aesthetics becomes more valuable in virtue of its applicability to a specific situation, not less.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 148
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 134
A second and more pressing disadvantage to Budd’s model is his interpretation of how we should understand something to consist as part of a natural environment. He correctly observes that given the state of the world we live in, the idea of pristine or untouched nature is an ever-increasingly difficult thing to come across. Humanity has had profound effects on the world, not just in the construction of agricultural and urban landscapes, but also in broader ways such as human-caused climate change and species extinction. Surprisingly, he concludes that the appropriate thing to do in a situation where the natural scene or object is of arguably natural origin, such as a farm, is that we ought to ignore the man-made aspects of the farm such as the fences and neatly organized rows of crops, and focus solely on the natural aspects of the scene such as the rolling hills or the sun. I contend that this goes against the very reason that Budd, among others puts forth for this appreciation of nature as nature: we should evaluate something based on what it is. To pretend that a farm landscape lacks certain qualities that portray its semi-artefactual character prevents us from perceiving it correctly. This technique of the viewer being able to choose what is and is not relevant to their aesthetic experience of something fits within Budd’s broader scheme of freedom of environmental aesthetic appreciation, but once again diminishes the impact of the broader requirement that we appreciate things in a way true to what they are.

A more reasoned response to the observation that the idea of “pristine” nature is in the present a largely imagined one might be to conclude that the separation between human and natural environments is a blurry one at best, and an artificial one

\[Ibid., 8-10\]
at worst. This uneasy distinction has unearthed the possibility of a more unified concept of environmental aesthetics, one that seeks to apply in some degree if not equally to both environments created by human and natural means. It rejects a key claim of Budd’s argument that we must appreciate “nature as nature”, but bolsters a more fundamental one, that Hepburn and Carlson argue for as well: that the strongest model of environmental aesthetic appreciation will be true to what the environment actually is, a hybrid of natural and human-crated elements.

The Shift Towards The Consideration of Human Environments

In recent discourse, the notion of the aesthetics of environment applying solely to natural environments has come into question. The truly global scope of human influence on the planet has become not just more prevalent, but apparent and observable, as well. There are fewer and fewer locations on earth that humans have not directly visited, with such inhospitable locales as the top of the tallest mountains and the deepest points of the oceans having received human contact. Even places that we haven’t directly reached have been affected by greenhouse gas emissions, ozone depletion, and other pollutants, which we have only relatively recently been able to accurately quantify through advancements in scientific understanding. One of consequences of the globalization of human life is that there is no pure wilderness left in the world as we traditionally understand it: as a place unaffected by humanity. The intentional preservation of natural habitats with wildlife preserves is no less an example of human influence; creating a designated space that flora and fauna are not
actively interfered with is an interference through inaction. If a particular species of invasive plant that would otherwise have gone extinct manages to thrive in a wilderness preserve, it would clearly have been brought on by human involvement. Clearly, the concept of untouched or pristine nature is one that is vanishingly relevant in the modern world.

However, the trouble of the distinction between natural and human environments does not stop with human ingress on supposedly “natural” environments. Farms, hiking paths, parks, and gardens are all natural and human-influenced to different degrees: Budd’s dilemma of what is and is not natural arises again here. Modern crops have been selectively bred for generations, creating fruits and vegetables that are massively more nutritious, tasty, and/or visually appealing than their truly natural predecessors. The process of growing itself is highly assisted by fertilizers, pesticides, and the use of tools that range from shovels to industrial plows, again making it difficult to say what qualifies as a natural environment and what does not. Even a building must take into account the geographical qualities of the land it is built on: a structure built on soft dirt requires a different sort of foundation than one that is built on stone. The reasonable conclusion for many, including Allen Carlson\textsuperscript{16}, is that we ought to try to adapt our theories of aesthetics applicable to natural environments so that they might apply to human environments as well, which run the gamut from almost completely natural, in the case of a hiking trail, to almost completely artificial, such as a skyscraper. In doing so, we lessen the significance of our concern with the environment being natural, and focus even more

\textsuperscript{16}Carlson, Nature & Landscape 20
on the fact that the environment is one that we live in and that constantly surrounds us.

Accordingly, the most essential aspect of this sense of environmental aesthetics that includes human and natural environments is that it understands our environment as something we exist inside of, rather than apart from. As such, its scope includes things as diverse as campgrounds, houses, beaches, and office buildings, none of which are purely natural but nonetheless are environments that we live, work, and play in, and thus ought to be considered to be under the scope of what is environmental in this sense. Another significant inclusion within the realm of environmental aesthetics in this broader sense of the term is environmental art. Environmental art’s key feature is that the works it describes become our environment, rather than, for example, solely as a painting on a wall. They surround the viewer on all sides, and submerge her inside of the work, rather than existing as a mere object to be observed at a distance. Despite the genesis of environmental aesthetics being a denunciation of an art-only approach of aesthetics, it is a worthy inclusion to the discussion of the aesthetic value of our environment, so long as we are consider it in virtue of the way it creates an environment, rather than simply be appreciated in the manner of traditional painting or sculpture, as works of art separate from the space we inhabit.

I will next explore what I believe to be an especially useful model of environmental aesthetic appreciation, Arnold Berleant’s participatory model. The participatory model is so valuable because it reflects what I contend is the primary concern for Hepburn, Carlson, and Budd: that we need to appreciate the environment
in a way that is true to what it is. This means acknowledging that the environment is a space that we inhabit, interact with, and participate in, and appreciating our environment in virtue of its encouraging participation does just that. In short, it allows for the best understanding of the aesthetic qualities of the environment because it most convincingly characterizes our environment as it truly exists.
Part 1: The Participatory Model of Aesthetics

The participatory model of environmental aesthetic appreciation is a model developed by Arnold Berleant, which he also terms the “aesthetics of engagement.” As its name suggests, it seeks to understand a type of aesthetic appreciation that exists insofar as we are participants in the thing we are appreciating: we are constantly interacting with our environment, and the connection between it and us is one that has aesthetic value. Berleant expands on Hepburn and Carlson’s conceptions of the environment as the space that surrounds us to be one that “is a field of forces continuous with the organism, a field in which there is a reciprocal action of organism on environment and environment on organism.”

Our relationship with the environment around us is one of give and take: when I enter a cold room, I shiver. As I occupy the space, though, my body heat gradually raises the ambient temperature in the room. This type of minute, mutual interaction between person and environment happens constantly, and it is through these interactions, big and small, that we understand our environment: as the space immediately around us, with which we continuously, directly interact. As such, a model of environmental aesthetics that reflects this constant interaction will provide the model that is, to paraphrase Malcolm Budd, “most true to what it is,” a task that the participatory model of aesthetics succeeds at handily, and is so valuable precisely

\(^1\) Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment* 9
because of the way it adheres to the way we understand and relate to our environment.

Individual features of an environment are more valuable under the participatory model when they inspire or entice to physically interact with it. Berleant’s definitive example is the curved forest path that is obscured by the foliage it weaves through. As the trail the hiker is to follow disappears behind a tree, it incites a desire for the hiker to continue on and discover what lies beyond. A counterexample illustrates just why the curved hiking path is so alluring: imagine a perfectly straight hiking path, with the final destination as well as everything between it and you visible in the distance. From your current perspective, you can already see everything there is to be seen, and there is no reason to continue on. Interest wanes and you return home. Contrast that, then, with the path that conceals what exists beyond, beckoning you to explore. In this case, the appeal of the former over the latter is clear.

Rejection of a Disinterested Perspective

As Berleant sees it, the participatory model strongly differentiates itself from, and originates as a response to, an imposed dichotomy between subject and object, which has its origins in Kantian disinterestedness. As mentioned above, disinterestedness is the concept that dictates that in experiencing something we are considering aesthetically, we ought to ignore any aspects of it that relate to our personal experience or outside knowledge. The imposed subject/object dichotomy as
described by Carlson\textsuperscript{2} seems to focus solely on our personal experiences and the understanding of person and environment to exist separately\textsuperscript{3}. With regard to environmental aesthetics, it compels a separation between the aesthetic and all other engagements you might conceivably have with the object of appreciation,\textsuperscript{4} which Berleant concludes does not cohere to the character of environments. Because the aesthetic experience of environment as Berleant understands it necessarily unifies these two types of engagement, the separated perspective is an unsatisfying one from which to aesthetically appreciate an environment.

Appreciating the environment from a separated perspective would require that we find a way to dismiss our personal histories, actions, and preferences when considering an environment. But these personal aspects are an essential part of our experience of an environment, aesthetic or otherwise; if we dismiss them, we are in turn dismissing a key part of that environment’s aesthetic value. An acrophobe has a drastically different aesthetic experience of the Grand Canyon, for example, than someone who has no such fear of heights. For the former, being anywhere near the Grand Canyon is likely to inspire feelings of fear and apprehension, while the latter would be more likely to be overtaken with the immense scope and majesty of the canyon. Our experience, and thus our aesthetic understanding, of our environment is in this way highly characterized by the particularities of our personal histories and

\textsuperscript{2} Carlson, \textit{Nature and Landscape} 18.
\textsuperscript{3} Carlson conflates the concept of Kantian disinterestedness and the similar perspective that solely entails a separation of subject and object, and furthermore applies to all types of aesthetic experience, not simply beautiful ones. I will hereafter refer to the latter to as the ‘separated perspective’, in order to more clearly delineate the two.
\textsuperscript{4} Berleant, \textit{Art and Engagement} 26
preferences. This acknowledgement of subjectivity that is inherent in aesthetic appreciation of a given thing does not encompass the whole of the participatory model, however. It’s not just that our personal and physical perspectives color our appreciation of a given thing, but also that the thing being appreciated (in this case, our environment) also helps inform our perspective: imagine the naturalist who has spent a large portion of her life outdoors, and as a result felt compelled to work for the US Department of Natural Resources.

This is an especially pertinent example, because her aesthetic experience of nature informs her understanding of that environment, and her perspective and subsequent decision to work for the DNR in turn continues to have (hopefully positive) consequences on the environment. In the process of acknowledging this cyclical relationship between person and environment, it becomes clearer that the distinction between human and environment is one that perhaps ought not to be made at all: “we can say… not that I live in my environment but that I am my environment. “5 This is perhaps the part of the participatory model that is most hard to pin down. Instinctually, we as humans are keen on sharply demarcating between “me” and “not-me”, and to relinquish such a concrete separation is a difficult task. However, the exchange of forces and matter between organism and environment make distinction just as troublesome. At what point does the air we breathe constitute part of our bodies? At what point does the food we eat? The actual point of separation between “me” and “not-me” is unclear, and perhaps not important. We are so inextricably tied

5 Berleant, Aesthetics and Environment 8. Emphasis mine.
to the circumstances of our immediate environment that it is more useful, Berleant contends, to think of ourselves as being continuous with our environment.

Varieties of Participatory Experience

If we are able to accept this continuity between environment and participant (a term I will use in lieu of ‘observer’ or ‘viewer’), what, then, constitutes a valuable aesthetic experience under this model? To put it simply, something is more valuable under Berleant’s view to the extent that it provokes participation, in either a literal or symbolic way. Besides the example of the curved hiking path, which entices the hiker to follow its curving path and see what lies beyond, he also points to doors and gateways, which serve a similar function: to invite us within them, and to see what lies on the other side. This is not to say, though, that the only draw in the participatory model is the lure of the unknown. Berleant contends that it is the variety of our environment that excites us, and that regularity and repetitiveness drive us away.

Another significant element of the participatory model is that it attempts to unseat sight and sound as the only senses relevant to aesthetic experience, and particularly rejects the idea that we must consciously attend to the aesthetic thing, as is the case for a film or a concert. For example, Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty (figure 1.1), an artificial spiral-shaped peninsula that juts into the Great Salt Lake, isn’t just observed using the eye, but engages other modes of perception such as smell and touch, as well. The salt water of the lake alters the scent of the air at the site, and the

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ 12\]
Figure 1.1. Spiral Jetty with person standing at center. 
Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. Image Courtesy Michael David Murphy, 
whileseated.org
rocky spiral can be traversed on. A directly touchable artwork such as this draws us in using not only senses that are consciously attended to, but passive ones as well.

Berleant claims that it can also include works that elicit an imagined participatory response. He points to works such as Caravaggio’s *The Musician*, which features musicians playing alongside unused instruments facing the viewer, symbolically inviting us to join the revelry. Even the landscape painting, which is so concretely tied to the landscape model, lends itself to the participatory model insofar as they portray environments that lend themselves to exploration, again symbolically inviting the viewer to participate. A particularly salient example is that of Chinese and Japanese landscape paintings (Figure 1.2). They often feature paths leading from a village at the base of a mountain up to the peak, where there is a monastery or other remote building. The intended viewing technique involves imagining one’s own passage to and return from the mountain hut, and taking stock of your “surroundings” as you go, a process that mimics the experience of actually traversing the landscape. Berleant concludes that this provides the same type of experience as an actual hike.

So then, we have arrived at a sense of what the participatory model entails. It is fundamentally a rejection of the understanding of aesthetic value as being something that exists in an objective, constant way that is perceived by an observer as being separate from her (and its) surroundings. Instead, the participatory model finds worth in the connection or unity between an environment as a whole and the things that consist in it. To that end, something has more aesthetic value when it allows for a greater connection between participant and environment.
Figure 1.2. Traditional Japanese landscape painting. Note the figure traveling away from the stream and his boat in the bottom-right corner, the building in the background, and the way the path leads up and away from the stream.

Sesshū Tōyō, selection from *Autumn and Winter Landscapes*, end of 15th or beginning of 16th century, Ink on Paper, 47.7 x 30.2 cm, Tokyo National Museum. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SesshuShuutouTou.jpg
Objections and Expansion

I next pose a few challenges to Berleant’s model, the last two of which I will expand on in part three. The most apparent is that there are many aesthetic objects, structures, and ideas that are wholly inappropriate to be appreciated using this method. It doesn’t apply well to works of art that don’t play a substantive role in the environment we occupy, for example. An average viewer can’t have a reciprocal relationship with the Mona Lisa: they will travel to the Louvre, observe the painting behind glass, and move on: there is literally a separation between subject and object, and we can’t appreciate it in virtue of it being participatory if we can’t participate with it. Additionally, the concept of an art gallery (at least in the traditional sense), which seeks to place works of art in a space devoid of distraction so as to facilitate the works being appreciated on their own merits, likewise inhibits this model’s application for the same reason\(^7\). As I stated earlier, however, I contend that universal applicability is not something to strive for an aesthetic model. Tailoring it to particular types of experiences makes it more compellingly relevant to those types. At the same time, it’s not productive to get bogged down in defining the ideal aesthetic experience for every conceivable situation, so I believe the middle ground of considering things that can be accurately categorized as participatory is sufficient for the participatory model.

\(^7\) It could be argued that an art gallery is its own special kind of environment, rather than a space that is not an environment. That being said, it is unquestionably designed as a static space that fades into the background and allows the artworks displayed to be the focus of attention.
The most immediately essential objection for the participatory model to solve is how to justify the rejection of the disinterested or separated perspective. The separated perspective dictates that we view an aesthetic object without considering our personal point of view regarding that object: we must ignore the attributes it possess that we might find personally enticing or morally valuable, as well as refrain from considering, for example, how the painting of a basketball reminds us of our childhood experiences playing basketball.

Disinterestedness has been a guiding point of Western aesthetic discourse since Kant, and helps to define what has been thought to be one of aesthetics as a discipline of philosophy’s most appealing aspects: that it can stand on its own terms, and unlike other fields such as ethics and metaphysics, can avoid endlessly having to answer the question “yes, but why?” because beauty for its own sake is the final motivation. Doing away with disinterestedness, however, is a necessary part of the participatory model: it requires that we separate ourselves from the work, object or environment we are experiencing, and we must take a physical and mental step back from the thing we are looking at in order to perceive it correctly, if we are to adhere to a disinterested perspective. But a disinterested perspective presumes the ability to distinguish between what is and is not part of the focus of appreciation. This is not possible with our environment because what our environment actually consists of is inherently ambiguous. First, it is unclear when something is too far away to be part of our environment. Must it be visible, or audible, within the city, or the country, or the world? Second, it is unclear when something is too ‘close’ to be a part of our environment. Is air, is food, or is water? These things go in and out of our bodies.
constantly, and there is no meaningful way to discern when they are part of us, and when they are part of our environment, because “we are our environment.” As such, the step back is impossible because there is no step back to be taken; it utterly surrounds us. There is no way to remove ourselves from our conception of the environment we inhabit precisely because of the relationship the participatory model describes: one of constant interaction. Furthermore, the environment we exist in is in part characterized by our presence. In walking down a hiking path, I influence that environment in my own unique way: I take steps of a certain stride, look at things that entice me personally, and carve my initials into a tree that I find particularly worthy of such a marking. All of these things that I do irreversibly and uniquely alter a space each time I visit it characterize the experience of that environment. Disinterestedness is fundamentally about trying to remove a personal perspective from interpretation and evaluation of beautiful things. But the environments we occupy are so amorphous and dependent on our unique experiences of them that trying to appreciate it from a removed perspective, or any that is not uniquely our own, doesn’t equate to truly appreciating it.

On my view, Berleant’s inclusion of artistic works like paintings that symbolically invite the viewer to engage in an activity, rather than ones that encourage physical interaction, are examples of participatory aesthetics that do not convey the way in which human and environment have direct physical influence on one another. Part of what makes this mode of aesthetic appreciation resonate so strongly is the fact that in scenarios such as being led around a turn of a hiking path,
the feeling of being drawn in and of calling out for interaction in seems nearly unavoidable. On the other hand, to see a lute in a painting facing towards the viewer is a far more ambiguous way to find yourself drawn to the environment that is portrayed. It may simply be the case that these examples of symbolic or imaginary participation are valuable in a different way as a result of the participation existing solely within the mind; and without delving too deeply into the differences between the real and the imaginary, I will say that the terms environment and participation suggest a preference for actual, real-life activities.

Additionally, while the participatory model ostensibly concerns itself with human-environment interaction, Berleant avoids using it to describe direct physical participation between the two, and instead only references the way we are attracted towards occupying or entering a space. This is doubly odd: simply inhabiting a space is certainly the most trivial way we can interact with it, and to merely dwell on the allure of an environment, rather than the actual interaction, is an unnecessary limitation. There is no reason that his model would necessarily exclude more direct interaction between human and environment, in two senses: first, rather than considering only the allure of a hiking trail, the participatory model is better for additionally including the actual act of hiking on it. Second, the process of physically transforming the environment that surrounds you, be it through gardening, construction of a building, or chopping down a tree, is a far more palatable example of the interaction between person and space.

We might ask, then, what the consequences of this model are. We can determine whether or not something conforms to the participatory model of
environmental aesthetic appreciation, but so what? We have already rejected the notion of using it to any kind of disinterested judgment. What good does it do us to say that this hiking path is aesthetically valuable because it entices us to engage with it? One possible way this might be done is to consider the implications such a perspective might have on our moral outlook. Our environment is first and foremost the space in the world that we occupy, and any aesthetic model that seeks to describe how to appreciate it ought to allow that environment to prosper. For example, an argument against the landscape model of environmental aesthetics, which envisions the beauty of a particular view or vista as being appreciable in the same way as a landscape painting, is that it imposes a standard of beauty that is often not beneficial to that environment. A plan to build wind turbines off the coast of Cape Cod was cancelled because residents argued that the scenic view was a more pertinent concern than the environmental (as well as economic) benefit the turbines would provide⁹.

In what ways in can the participatory model go from simply describing the environment to actual, tangible world-improvement? All ways we interact with the environment have direct physical consequences on it, whether they are positive or negative. Walking the same path over and over again can cause erosion, while brushing up against a plant can help spread its pollen, and foster its reproduction. If the participatory model’s goal to remind the participant in an environment that they exist as an element within rather than outside of it is successful, it makes the participant aware of the consequences their actions have on that environment. Additionally, recognizing that our environment plays a direct role in our well-being

⁹ http://www.capewind.org/
encourages us to seek out ways to improve and maintain that environment. As such, a person who is meaningfully engaged with their environment and therefore more aware of the repercussions their own actions have on their environment is more likely to choose to do things that benefit their environment, whether it is reducing their household waste by recycling more, working on trail maintenance at a wilderness preserve, or putting solar panels on their house.

This awareness of consequence doesn’t just apply to the natural environment, however; it can have an equally profound effect on our daily lives. Someone who is more aware of the ways their actions affect their environment around them is more likely to hold the elevator door, or refill the coffee pot after they empty it. A prominent concern within environmental aesthetics is the moral consequences of a particular model. The participatory model at its strongest, I contend, will seek to provide some form of consideration for the well-being of the environment. This is a bit of a grey area, as what exactly it means to improve an environment depends very much on your perspective: where one person finds the ideal use of a particular space to be a forest, another may find the ideal use to be a water-park, or a shopping mall. However, it seems reasonable to say, at least, that there are some things that have clearly positive or negative consequences on our environments: chemical dumping is a strongly negative one, while the cleanup of the same is positive. I contend that the participatory model directly supports this requirement for the preservation and betterment of the environment, and to include it will only make understanding the world as something in which we participate in this way more valuable. In order to attempt to answer these questions, I will next look towards Japanese gardens, which
in tandem with a few particular concepts in Japanese aesthetics may lead towards an answer.
Part 2: Japanese Gardens

The idea of aesthetics in the Western sense as the philosophical study of beauty is a relatively recent one in Japan, as it was introduced in the early Meiji period (1868-1912). However, there are nonetheless aesthetic concepts, tropes, and ideas that have existed far longer than that in Japan, and these concepts are collectively referred to as Japanese aesthetics. Japanese aesthetics aligns itself well with environmental aesthetics because the concepts that exist within it are rarely relevant to only art, or any other single thing; they are nearly always applied to diverse topics such as painting, everyday activities, and natural features. They are usually tied to a particular facet of Japanese philosophy, and are rarely thought of as only having aesthetic value on their own merit, but rather being artistic or otherwise physical incarnations of a broader philosophical principle. For example, wabi-sabi, the appreciation of impermanence and imperfection in things, is embodied most viscerally by a porcelain tea pot that has cracked and chipped with use or the Japanese cherry blossom, which is considered the most beautiful of the flowering trees precisely because of how quickly they blossom and fall to the ground. The value in these things is not just that they are appreciated because of their transience, but that

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1 A note on pronunciation and italicized words: there are only five vowel sounds in Japanese, and they all are always the same sound: A, I, U, E and O. “a” always sounds like “ah”, “i” is the vowel sound in “free”, “u is the vowel sound in “two”, “e” is the vowel sound in “grey”, and “o” is the vowel sound in “go”. So wabi-sabi would be, phonetically, wah-bee sah-bee. I have adopted the convention of italicizing Japanese words to designate them as such, with the exception of proper nouns (e.g., Kyoto) and words that have entered the English lexicon (e.g., sushi).

2 Parkes, Japanese Aesthetics
they remind the viewer of a more elaborate principle: the Buddhist contention that all things are impermanent.

Japan is often characterized as a country that appropriates things from other cultures (most frequently China and Korea, their closest geographic and ethnic neighbors), and then transforms them into something unique and belonging to itself. Perhaps the most basic example of this is the writing system: Japanese is partially written in an adapted form of Chinese characters (漢字, kanji). Yet this borrowing extends to other realms, including painting, poetry, and garden design. Like many Japanese aesthetic and cultural techniques, Japanese gardens owe many of their design elements to Chinese gardens, as well as concepts from Buddhism and Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan. Japanese gardens have evolved over the centuries, reflecting the cultural mores of the eras in which a particular style was popularized. Today, the bulk of the major historical gardens in Japan are associated with a Buddhist temple or a Shinto shrine. I will be focusing on two types, and using a particular example to illustrate them: the dry landscape garden, and the stroll garden. I will first give a description of the development of the garden in Japan, along with the closely linked progression of philosophical and religious ideas.

**Shinto**

The very beginning of Japanese gardening and nature cultivation was heavily related to Shinto (神道, “Way of the Gods”). Shinto is somewhat unusual among contemporary religions insofar as it has no central text or ethical teachings, which
tend to be the defining aspects of western religions; as such, there is some debate as to whether it ought to be considered a ‘spirituality’ instead, though I believe that the term religion is an appropriate one. It is a polytheistic, animistic religion that purports the existence of *kami* ( Kami, spirits/gods) in all things, especially natural objects such as trees, rocks, forests and mountains, as well as constructed objects like cars, bridges, and buildings.

Throughout Japan, there are certain natural features that are thought to be particularly sacred, and they have been protected and maintained by Shinto priests. Mount Fuji is a sacred place because of the *kami* that dwells within it; contrast this with Mount Sinai, which is important in the Judeo-Christian tradition because of Moses having legendarily received the Ten Commandments from God there. The Grand Shrine at Ise (first constructed in 692, and rebuilt every twenty years since then) is among the most spiritually important places in Japan, and exists where it does in the middle of the forest in large part because it is the forest itself that is sacred, and the Shrine exists to signify that; though the buildings themselves are significant (among other purposes, they house the Imperial Regalia of Japan), the focus of the temple is the natural space that surrounds it.

**Heian-Era Gardens**

The earliest gardens that existed for aesthetic purposes were stylistic transplants from Korea and China. The gardens became popular among aristocrats in the Heian period (794-1192). In this era, the capital of Japan was permanently
established at Heian-kyō (now Kyoto), and it remained the seat of Government until the Meiji Emperor moved it to Edo (now Tokyo) in the late 19th century.

The gardens in the Heian period were mostly found in the residences of the aristocrats of that era, which were known as shinden (寝殿, “sleeping hall”). They were strongly influenced by Chinese geomancy/ feng-shui, which dictated the physical structure of the garden, as well as the shinden, and even the design of cities. Heian-kyō was famously located in an especially auspicious spot according to the tenets of feng-shui, due to its being surrounded by mountains on the north, west, and east, and a river in the south. The design of these gardens was thought to affect the ki (気, ”life energy”) of its inhabitants, and followed a specific set of rules about the placement of elements such as rocks, streams, ponds, and trees, so as to maximize the energy flow therein, which was detailed in the eleventh century Sakuteiki (作庭記, “book of gardening”). For example, vertical stones were thought to allow demons into the shinden if placed in the Northeast corner, so placement elsewhere was preferable.\(^3\)

The Influx of Zen Buddhism

Eventually, the Heian gave way to the Kamakura period (1185-1333), and in the same era, Zen Buddhism became prevalent in Japan, which remains the most culturally significant, but by no means the only, sect of Buddhism in Japan to date. As François Berthier understands it, “Zen is not, properly speaking, a religion… Nor is Zen a philosophy… Zen is rather a form of thought or, better, a mode of thinking that

\(^3\) Shimoyama, *Sakuteiki* 4-5
give rise to a certain way of acting.”⁴ One of Buddhism’s key tenets is the rejection of
the false belief that we have constant selves. Buddhist thought claims that everything
about the world is ever-changing, including us, and so to consider something that
exists as a permanent “I” is inherently misguided. The distinguishing feature of Zen
Buddhism among other sects is its focus on achieving this rejection of false selfhood
through action: on the particular activity the practitioner is doing in hope of emptying
one’s mind of conscious thought, and thus consideration of the self. This is done
through a variety of activities such as simple seated meditation, or zazen (座禅),
which is where the name Zen originates, walking meditation, and contemplation of a
kōan (公案), a Zen meditative puzzle with no answer meant to allow the contemplator
to empty their mind, among others. This focus on simplicity related to a rejection of
opulence, with a preference for empty space manifesting itself in many forms of Zen
art, from paintings to poetry. Buddhism in Japan is unusual among religions
introduced to new cultures in that it does not supplant or compete with the preexisting
religion, Shinto; rather, the two were found to be largely mutually compatible, and
continue to coexist. Today, most Japanese people’s religious practices are an
amalgam of Shinto and Buddhism.

Dry Landscape Gardens

Gardens were no exception to the Zen influence of “less-is-more”. Instead of
the variety of plants and elaborate designs of Heian-era gardens, dry landscape
gardens, or karesansui (枯山水, “withered mountains and water”), sometimes known

⁴ Berthier, Reading Zen in the Rocks 1
as Zen gardens, sought to evoke natural features in the most stripped-down way possible. For example, streams and waterfalls were powerfully recreated without the use of any actual water: in its place, the designers used stones to evoke the river’s flowing motion. Some contain vegetation, but the majority of dry landscape gardens consist mostly or entirely of rocks, which has allowed for the gardens to exist in the essentially same state for a much longer time than vegetative gardens. Early dry landscape gardens borrowed from the tradition within landscape painting of replicating famous landscapes, especially Chinese ones (which were only ever seen as paintings by those designing the gardens, so the replications were by no means accurate). The paintings as well as the gardens heavily favored blank space, embodied in the aesthetic quality of yohaku-no-bi (余白の美, “beauty of extra white”), which sought to find beauty in the blank, empty space of a work or a natural feature just as much as in the parts that are filled in. Yohaku-no-bi is present in many forms of traditional Japanese art, including music, which is striking for the long pauses between sounds, in addition to painting, Noh drama and garden design, among others. Dry landscape gardens do this through the use of expanses of coarse, uniform gravel, which typically makes up the majority of the garden by area. Yohaku-no-bi’s use of empty space additionally embodies the idea of nothingness (‘no-thing-ness’), that any perception of an object as a constant thing is flawed; the concept of a ‘thing’ in this regard is ultimately nonexistent. The use of yohaku-no-bi to aesthetically portray a concept in this way is prototypical of Japanese aesthetics.⁵

⁵ Keane, Japanese Garden Design 57
Ryōanji and its Design

Likely the most well-known dry landscape garden in the world is the one located at Ryōanji (竜安寺, “The Temple of the Dragon at Peace”) in northwestern Kyoto, and is typically referred to by the same name. The garden and main building of the temple are inside of a much larger compound of 120 acres that contains a small lake, walking paths, and a meditation hall. The garden itself is unusually sparse, even within the realm of dry landscape gardens, at approximately 200 square meters in the shape of a rectangle with the vast majority consisting of pale white gravel (Figure 2.1, 2.2). It is surrounded on the back and viewer’s right by a low wall that allows foliage and the sky to be visible simultaneously with the garden, on the viewer’s left by the building of the temple, and in the front by a covered wooden veranda for viewing. It contains only fifteen rocks arranged in one group of five and two groups each of two and three. It is famously said that there is no one place on the veranda where one can see all fifteen rocks simultaneously, though all are visible from at least one location (when I visited, I was unsuccessful at even discerning all fifteen from multiple perspectives, but not terribly persistent about it). Each grouping is surrounded by moss, which gives the sense of mountainous islands with lowlands leading into the ocean. The gravel that surrounds the groupings and makes up the majority of the garden further evokes the feeling. It is meticulously raked in lines traveling left to right and in circles around each grouping, which suggests ocean waves’ interaction

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6 It is often considered among the best examples of yohaku-no-bi in this regard.
Figure 2.2. Diagram of Ryōanji dry landscape garden, attached veranda and hōjō (方丈, abbot’s quarters).

with landmasses in the real world. The gardens are clearly meant to resemble the natural world on a grand scale, but it’s not generally thought that it is meant to be representational of any particular place. The monks that reside at the temple are responsible for the maintenance of the garden, and rake and clean the garden every day. Marc Keane contends that this maintenance is the essential use of the garden, at least from the perspective of the monks who use it as a tool for meditation⁷. It is lit only by sunlight, so it can’t be observed at night, but the bright gravel reflects sunlight well, so it’s uncomfortable to look at for long periods during the day. On the other hand, the fact that it is such a mysterious design lends credence to that it may be considered a form of Kōan, designed to cause the viewer to empty their mind by contemplation of the garden, and thus arguably intended for meditation.

There is much to be said about the design considerations and viewing techniques of Ryōanji’s Karesansui garden. The garden’s actual construction is somewhat enigmatic, as the creators are anonymous: like many gardens of this era, it seems to have been designed and built by extremely low-class peasants of the designation kawaramono (河原もの, “river people”)⁸. As such, it’s hard to reach conclusions about what the creator’s intentions were. The natural method of viewing the garden is dependent upon where the viewer sits on the veranda; from the left side, for example, the rocks tend to encourage the viewer to look left to right; from the center, on the other hand, the gaze is more elliptical, moving in a rough oval. It is not

⁷ Keane, Japanese Garden Design 62
⁸ Ibid., 54
representational of a particular natural form, but there are several prominent interpretations about what the layout might mean. The groupings of two, three and five are numerologically significant, and are a common technique in Japanese and Chinese gardens. The layout of the rocks such that there is no one spot where they are all visible serves to remind the viewer that there is no position from which you can see everything, and to consider alternate perspectives. Some writers have elaborated beyond the impression of mountains and sea to claim that they are representational of the legendary mountain-islands of the immortal hermits, or the five Chinese sacred mountains. However, it’s not clear that any of these interpretations are correct, and none are authoritative. Unfortunately, the intentions of the creators are not known, because like most karesansui gardens of the era, the people who designed and made it were anonymous, and were likely laborers, not Buddhist monks or famous artists. Perhaps the most prominent view is that the exact “true” motive behind Ryōanji’s design is best not known, and for the viewer to find their own meaning. Nonetheless, it has still had an impact on Japanese aesthetic concepts.

*Kire* and Consequences of Japanese Aesthetics

A prominent principle in Japanese aesthetics is *kire* (切れ, a nominalized form of the verb “to cut”). It’s an intricate concept that applies to a variety of art forms, including *Noh*, Japanese mask drama, and *ikebana*, Japanese flower arrangement, and dry landscape gardens⁹. The cut as a principle originates in Zen

⁹ Parkes, *Japanese Aesthetics*
Buddhism: to cut oneself off from the ignorance inherent in life or existence, which refers to the assumption of a constant self. To cut away this ignorance allows us to see into our own nature: the lack of existence of a constant self, and thus any self at all. In contemplating a cut, the viewer is reminded of transition: kire exists as a separation between two otherwise continuing things, and elicits an awareness of that transition, of change. It would be very difficult to keep track of time if we didn’t have something to divide it, to break it up: an analog clock without marks (or at least marks implied by the orientation of the clock, with 12 being at the top) would be impossible to read. In the process of breathing, there are two points within each cycle of inhalation and exhalation where we are not bringing air in or out of our bodies: this is the cut, the transition from inhale to exhale and vice versa. The aesthetic cut works the same way: Take ikebana, for example. Flowers in their natural environment are rooted to the ground, seemingly unmoving and static. Ikebana demonstrates to the viewer that flowers are not permanent objects, and can be removed, shaped, and changed accordingly: all this seeks to remind the viewer that impermanence is everywhere, in all parts of the environment, and especially within his own self.

There are several instances of kire at Ryōanji. The low wall that separates the living and moving outside, with trees and animals, from the “dead” and still interior, which contains almost nothing organic or mobile except moss and perhaps a wayward leaf, is perhaps the most widely recognized. There is also a track approximately one foot wide that runs around the garden that is filled with a coarse, darker gravel that serves as an intermediate cut between the insinuated motion of the stones and raked gravel and the smoothness of the wall. Even within this track, which is almost entirely
rectangular, there is another “cut” in the form of a small jutting portion, breaking the
continuity of the otherwise symmetrical rectangle.

The whole of Ryōanji, and other dry landscape gardens like it, are an
interesting example of the principle of impermanence insofar as since they are
primarily made of stone, they exude the illusion of being immune from temporality.
This is of course not the case, as even stone wears down and changes shape over time,
from rain, wind, and age. It is possible to interpret the stones’ longevity as a
particularly strong rebuke of our illusion of constancy of self: after all, what is a
human lifetime to a stone?10 Pondering the stones’ slow but nonetheless occurring
transformation further serves to remind us that our lives are fleeting, and that the
existence of a constant self is a dangerous, incorrect view.

These examples are crucial in that they show the interrelatedness of Japanese
aesthetics to other philosophical topics. As environmental aesthetician Yuriko Saito
notes, “aesthetic appreciation of nature and environment is often inseparable from
[the Japanese] general worldview,”11 contrasting with the Western understanding of
aesthetics that sees beauty as being primarily, if not exclusively, related to itself.

Stroll Gardens

By contrast with the minimal Zen gardens of the Kamakura period, the
dominant trend in Japanese gardens in the Edo period (approximately 1605-1867),

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10 Bertheir, Reading Zen 32
11 Saito, Future Directions for Environmental Aesthetics
known as the stroll garden or kaiyū-shiki teien (回遊式庭園, “excursion garden”),
was large, resplendent, and grandiose. They were constructed on behalf of the upper
class daimyō (大名, “big name”), who were put in positions of financial and political
power by the Shogun, the military ruler of Japan during the Edo period (the emperor,
while still technically the head of state, was essentially a figurehead). As a result of
the political stability of the era, the gardens were passed down from generation to
generation, which meant they grew into vast estates with multiple themed areas. Stroll
gardens, too, often borrowed the tradition of copying famous landscapes and scenes,
but opted more frequently for domestic locations such as Mount Fuji, or Mount
Arashi near Kyoto, perhaps reflecting the inward-looking nature of the isolationist
Edo period. Many contain water features, like ponds with islands and bridges or
stepping-stones, as well as other constructed elements such as small buildings,
shrines, and chashitsu (茶室, “tea room”, a term which refers to both independent
structures and rooms as a part of a larger house or structure).

In fact, stroll gardens can be understood as an evolution and expansion of roji,
or tea gardens (露地, lit. “dewy ground”); many stylistic and functional attributes of
stroll gardens find their origin in roji, though there are numerous dissimilarities as
well. In a functional sense, roji were used exclusively as passageways to the
chashitsu, whereas stroll gardens can also be appreciated on their own merits. The
most essential physical aspect of both gardens is the meandering path that leads a
specific route through the scenery of the garden. The stroll garden elaborated upon
the roji’s path by including points along it that enticed the visitor to pause and look at
a particular scene: for example, a clearing in the foliage that affords a view of a pond,
or a grouping of flowers. They often make use of flat stepping stones to designate the path, made out of either naturally shaped stones, meticulously cut geometric ones, or a combination of both. These are deliberately placed in such a way that the visitor cannot maneuver over them without some degree of attention; though they are not far enough apart that a jump is required, they necessitate steps where one foot moves forward, and the other follows, as opposed to a natural gait wherein the feet alternate being in front. This serves to make the visitor more involved with the process of walking through the garden, as opposed to simply looking with his or her eyes as they move through unhindered. Furthering this feeling is the meandering quality of the path, which will very rarely be straight. Dense foliage such as trees and shrubs are placed in such a way that, in combination with a winding trail, lead to a constant awareness of one’s surroundings; the scenery changes rapidly as the visitor moves about the garden. If a path were to run in a straight line, the visitor could walk down it without so much as a second thought, and the scenery would remain essentially constant. However, the obscured turn of a corner prevents this sort of complacency.

Beyond this, the visitor is sometimes deliberately exposed to a particular scene (such as a pond or depiction in miniature of Mt. Fuji), only for it to be obscured by a piece of greenery such as a shrub or dense tree, and later re-shown from a different perspective. This does not just allow the visitor to imagine being able to see the real-life landmark from different vantages, but the technique of portraying a single object from various specific perspectives, interspersed with sections of what almost feels like a tunnel gives the path a maze-like quality.
Figure 2.3. Stepping-stones across a pond at Heian-Jingu stroll garden, Kyoto. The placement and distance between the stones is such that it they cannot be traversed thoughtlessly but do not present any real physical danger.

Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons user Daderot, taken October 7, 2010. 
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heian-jingu_shinen_IMG_5748_0-25.JPG
Katsura Imperial Villa and the Stroll

The Katsura Imperial Villa (桂離宮, Katsura Rikyū/ lit. “Katsura Detached Palace”) is an estate in Western Kyoto that is among the most significant and elaborate examples of the stroll garden, as well as a prime example of Japanese architecture during that time. It was built over a period of approximately fifty years in the middle of the seventeenth century under the purview of Prince Hachijō Toshihito. It was built in sections, with the oldest section being built as early as 1615. It is located along the Katsura River, for which it is named, just under six miles southwest of the Kyoto Imperial Palace, which was the primary residence of the Emperor at the time of the villa’s construction. It is a large (especially by Japanese standards) estate of about 16 acres that consists of a central shoin (書院, drawing room) complex with sleeping/living areas, space for artistic pursuits, and servants’ quarters, surrounded by several ancillary buildings, ponds, streams, and gardens.

The majority of the buildings not connected to the shoin complex are a series of a small pavilions and arbors, many of which were related to the process of engaging in a chadō/tea ceremony (茶道, “way of tea”). There is a prescribed route that each participant in a chadō would take to the teahouse they were visiting. For example, in order to reach the chashitsu called Shokintei (松琴亭, “Pine-Harp Pavilion”), the visitor walks southeast from the main shoin, eventually arriving at the machiai (待合, “waiting arbor”) to pause and compose themselves,
Figure 2.4. Machiai, Katsura Imperial Villa, Kyoto. In Isozaki, *Katsura Imperial Villa*, Milan: Electa Architecture, 2005, page 227.
symbolically releasing their concerns of the outside world. In smaller tea gardens, the *machiai* serve to physically separate the inner and outer tea gardens, and typically is paired with a gate that further separates the two, though there is no distinction made at Katsura. The gate, *machiai*, and the act of pausing to reflect before proceeding to the teahouse, are all examples of *kire/cutting* discussed earlier. They seek to break up the continuity of the garden and the process of moving through it, and in that way draw attention to both.

After the guests depart the *machiai*, they travel south along the shore of the pond, where the Shokintei comes into view. There is a peninsula of small stones punctuated with a stone lantern that draws the eye towards the teahouse. Next, the path leads to the strikingly long and narrow *Shirakawa* (白川, “white river”, so named because of the waterfall upstream) bridge, which is five meters long, only 65 centimeters wide, and made of a single slab of stone, and serves to, like the sandbar, point the eye towards the Shokintei. The visitor then crosses to the ablution platform. Crossing the bridge is a daunting task, because its impressive length relative to its width causes the walker to feel as if they are at risk of falling, despite the actual risk being quite low. Unlike most *chashitsu*, there is no basin to wash at; only a flat, low outcropping that allows the visitor to reach into the stream to perform ritualistic ablutions. The ablutions are a key component of preparation for *chadô*; the activity of rinsing one’s hands and mouth, be it in the river or a basin, signifies the importance of
Figure 2.5. *Shirakawa* Bridge, Katsura Imperial Villa, Kyoto. The ablutions platform is visible in the upper right corner of the image. In Isozaki, *Katsura Imperial Villa*, Milan: Electa Architecture, 2005, page 234.
purity and cleanliness, and is a typical ritual at shrines and temples as well. Finally, the guests arrive at the Shokintei, and begin the tea ceremony.¹²

The process of walking through a stroll garden is a leisurely one. The guest is meant to move through it slowly. From the arrangement of the foliage to the construction of the path, there are myriad elements that are designed in such a way as to encourage the visitor to the garden to feel as though they are not simply viewing a beautiful thing from afar, but to experiencing it up close, and from all sides. Furthermore, when making use of the stroll garden as a pathway to partake in a tea ceremony, it allows for the visitor to focus on composing herself for the imminent ritual, and let the emotions and concerns of the outside world fade away.

Dry landscape and stroll gardens, though they are very different in scale, intended use, and appearance, nevertheless manage to embody many of the same principles, such as *kire* and *yohaku-no-bi*, and a more general sense of how aesthetic qualities can exist in a way not isolated from the rest of life, but in fact influencing the way we understand the world as a whole. In the next chapter, I will relate this sense of Japanese aesthetics, and gardens in particular, to Arnold Berleant’s participatory model, and flesh out the participatory model in light of them.

¹² Isozaki, *Katsura Imperial Villa* 220-250
Part 3: Berleant’s Participatory Model Re-Examined

After considering Japanese gardens and aesthetic principles, I return to Berleant’s model, and how it might be improved upon using these concepts. Again, the participatory model of environmental aesthetics is one that acknowledges that the line between human and environment is a blurry and unhelpful one, and rejects the dichotomy between subject and object that otherwise permeates aesthetic discourse. As such, appreciating our environment using the participatory model dictates that we consider the way in which an environment we occupy has an influence on us, and us on it. Under the participatory model, a certain environment or environmental feature has more aesthetic value when it invites or encourages you to interact with it. It entices you to become a participant rather than a separate observer, and draws attention to the relationship between person and environment. An example of such a feature might be a doorway or hiking path; Berleant describes the attraction that we experience towards these things as “drawing-in”.

I contend, however, that Berleant’s model doesn’t take this relationship far enough, in two ways: first, he does not fully explore the consequences of his model. He states that the participatory model “can be a powerful force to transform the world we inhabit into a place for human dwelling,\(^1\)” but doesn’t go so far as to explain what this transformation entails: in other words, what consequences this will have on us as inhabitants/participants. Second, I contend his use of the term “participatory” is taken less literally than it ought to be. He envisions the participatory model as applying

\(^{1}\) Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment* 13
equally to both physical and imaginary forms of participation. In the latter form, we imagine ourselves to be physically engaged with the object before us: for example, he contends that imagining walking a path visible in a Chinese or Japanese landscape painting ought to fall under the auspices of the participatory model because in viewing the painting, we imagine what it would be like if we were to step through the frame of the work and experience the scene it depicts from within. I argue that this inclusion does not mesh well with the broader implications of the participatory model, which entails a notion of existing physically within a space, and a reciprocal relationship wherein the participant and the environment each have an effect on one another. Regardless of whether or not you are symbolically engaged with a painting or photograph, the literal existence of a frame or barrier prevents you from having a relationship with it, because it is not part of your environment.

Similarly, I believe the term “participation” as Berleant uses it does not embrace the full scope of what it means to participate with our environment. It ought to include not just moving through and existing in an environment, but also directly interacting with it: the physical act of gardening, playing on a playground, or building a sandcastle, for example. Furthermore, the aesthetic value of an environment ought not simply be considered in virtue of it “inviting” participation, but inherent in the interaction that we have with it as well: in addition to finding value in the allure of the winding path, we ought to find it in the process of walking along it. I’ll begin with my first concern, the possible implications of participatory aesthetics.
The “Here-and-Now” and Implications of Participatory Aesthetics

The impetus behind the participatory model of aesthetics is that it acknowledges and fosters a relationship between an environment and its inhabitants. However, Berleant only goes so far as to say that the interactions that this relationship consists of are meaningful, not how they are meaningful. So what, if any, are the implications of this model? What influences could understanding this sort of aesthetic appreciation have on our lives, and on the world around us? I present a few ways in which this relationship might manifest itself.

As I discussed earlier, one of the ways the participatory model may be elaborated upon is to consider the moral implications of understanding the environment in this way. In viewing the environment as continuous with ourselves, we become more aware of the consequences of our actions as they affect us as well as the space around us. As such, an aesthetic experience characterized by the participatory model would ideally lead to the participant’s actions being more in line with what will lead to an improved environment, and an improved world. For example, understanding the environment as being reciprocally related to you might result in using reusable shopping bags, instead of disposable plastic ones.

The participatory model of aesthetics also fits well with the Buddhist concept of presence of mind. When you are engaged with the environment in the way Berleant describes, you are more aware of your surroundings, of the here-and-now. An example of how this might be can be found in the process of walking through Katsura Imperial Villa. The path that winds through the grounds at Katsura, while not
truly treacherous or physically strenuous, gives the walker a sense that the journey they are going on is one that ought to command their attention. The placement of the stepping-stones that make up the paths are often constructed from necessitates moving through the garden in a methodical, situationally aware way. The stones force the visitor to play the part of the superstitious ten-year-old who avoids the cracks in the sidewalk, making careful choices about the way they interact with the space; it feels intuitively wrong to step on the gravel that surrounds them, and is all the more evident when the stones lead the walker over a pond or stream. The Shirakawa Bridge is a particularly illuminating example of this forced awareness of the visitor’s surroundings. On regular ground, walking a path 65 centimeters wide is something an able-bodied human would be able to accomplish without so much as a second thought; however, when that path is a single five-meter long piece of stone suspended above a stream, the task commands focus, coercing the walker to pay attention to the space around them.

Humans often excessively concern themselves with what occurred in the past and how things will change in the future. Buddhist thought addresses this tendency by reminding the practitioner of the impermanence of all things, and that everything, whether we like it or not, and whether we can do anything about it or not (usually not) will eventually change, and to worry about it too much is fruitless and will make you unhappy. Buddhist thought teaches its practitioners to notice and appreciate things as they are now in the most literal sense of the word: to be grateful for their existence. We should be grateful for our home, our food, and our existence simply because there will be a time when we lack all three, and we should furthermore appreciate them
while we can; time is fleeting. The stepping-stones and narrow bridges of Katsura Imperial Villa demand that the visitor pay attention to what they are doing, and thus cease to be concerned with the past or future. Making your way across the seemingly precarious bridge empties the mind of anything except making sure not to get wet. This may be a key way that the aesthetics of engagement can be seen as having broader implications on our lives: a greater awareness and appreciation (again, meaning thankfulness) for the here-and-now. The aesthetic cut accomplishes a similar goal: the “cut[ting] off the root of life”\(^2\) that is the ignorance of this unending change. In making a cut, the Japanese garden designer seeks to remind the visitor the transience of life.

In order to fully realize the value of the participatory model, I believe that simply stating that there is aesthetic value in the relationship between participant and environment is insufficient. The rejection of disinterestedness, the contention that aesthetic considerations exist on their own terms and their own merits, dictates that we stop thinking of aesthetics as something that exists on its own, and consider the ramifications of any aesthetic theory that does so. The participatory model, if we apply it correctly, can have positive effects on our daily lives in making us more aware of the “here-and-now”, as well as causing us to be more involved with the care of the environment. These ways of implementing the participatory model depend on physical interaction with a tangible environment. To that end, I believe the participatory model is most valuable when it is applied to physical interaction with the environment around us.

\(^2\) Hakuin, *Zen Master Hakuin* 133-135
Physical vs. Imagined Participation

As I argued above, I believe the most important consequence of the participatory model of aesthetics is recognizing and valuing the relationship between the human and their environment. Within Berleant’s understanding of the model, he suggests that there is a manner of participatory aesthetic appreciation that he characterizes as an imagined participatory response; wherein an artist (especially a visual artist working in a two dimensional medium, such as painting) can invite the viewer to imaginatively participate in the work the artist has created\(^3\). One of his examples is the photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson, which typically features the backs or sides of people’s heads as they observe a scene, usually also visible in the shot, in order to suggest a feeling that the viewer, like the subjects of the photograph, exists within the world of the photograph. I do not mean to say that the intent of Cartier-Bresson was not to symbolically include the viewer in his photographs; viewing them makes it seem fairly obvious that it was. My concern is centered on the fact that imagined participation does not capture that key facet of what I argue is the most meaningful part of participatory aesthetics: material interaction with an actual environment. An imagined environment doesn’t come along with the “dynamic nexus of interpenetrating forces to which we contribute and respond”\(^4\) because it is just that; imagined.

\(^3\) Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment* 10
\(^4\) Berleant, *Aesthetics and environment*, p. 13
It is true that the imagined environment can certainly have an influence on the viewer. A Chinese landscape painting of a winding path may inspire the person viewing it to go on a month long hiking trip in Guangdong province. However, I contend that reciprocal physical interaction is key to the experience of participatory aesthetics, and that physical separation prevents true aesthetic engagement: I can imagine walking the path, but unless I actually attempt putting my foot through a canvas, the painting has not been acted upon, which is likely for the best.

I particularly object to his discussion of the Ryōanji dry landscape garden as an example of the participatory model. He describes the layout of the garden as “gently coax[ing] the visitor to move, since one of its fifteen stones always remains hidden wherever one stands on the viewing veranda,”⁵ and thus requiring moving around the veranda to fully appreciate the garden’s features. It can additionally arguably be considered to have participatory value in the imagined sense, because the viewer can imagine the garden to be evocative of mountains and ocean, and a beckoning call to venture around them. Nevertheless, the average visitor to Ryōanji is of course not allowed within the confines of the garden itself, and the barrier between viewer and object (ironically the same frame that evokes kire, the symbolic cut meant to mark transition) fundamentally prevents our participation in a physical way. Regardless of the artist’s attempt to create a work that draws the viewer symbolically in, the imposition of a physical barrier between viewer and an externally viewed work prevents participation in the sense that the participatory model envisions, of a

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 36
physical interaction between participant and space. As such, in my adaptation of the participatory model, I exclude works of art that exist with a barrier between the viewer and the viewed, particularly two-dimensional art such as painting and photography, precisely because of the lackluster, intangible way they attempt to embody what it means to participate in or with something.

While I feel that Berleant goes too far in including traditional two-dimensional and otherwise framed art within the realm of participatory aesthetics, on the other side of the coin, he doesn’t go far enough towards comprehensively including all aspects of what it means to participate with our environment. He notes that aesthetics has traditionally favored the eyes and ears as the means to have aesthetic experiences, and rightly claims that participating with the environment ought to include the engagement of other senses, but doesn’t elaborate upon what sorts of situations might invoke their use. Berleant’s examples are primarily limited to things that draw the visitor literally inside of them, namely paths and doorways. His understanding of participation seems limited to the acts of entering and occupying of space. There is no reason, however, why the participatory model should not encompass things that we interact with in a more substantial way, like a garden.

Consider specifically Ryōanji from the perspective of the monks who live and work there. The most tactile, direct way the dry landscape garden at Ryōanji is interacted with is the daily maintenance the resident monks perform: the inspection and manicure of the moss surrounding the rocks, removal of debris, and most distinctively, the raking of the gravel. In doing this, the monks are physically affecting the environment they inhabit, just as the environment in turn affects them,
as a mode for the active meditation that is a key component of Zen meditative practice, as well as encouraging a stronger feeling of presence of mind, of awareness of the here-and-now.

Berleant’s examples are also perceived largely visually. In following a hiking trail around a bend, you feel the ground under your feet, but the sensation he describes is nevertheless driven by what you see more than anything else: the visual tug of the path on your body around the next corner. However, we often interact with our environments in far more tactile ways. Mark di Suvero’s *Arikidea* in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden is a large structure made primarily of recycled iron that contains within it a swinging platform, and it is an integral part of the experience of the work to ride the swing. In stepping onto and rocking back and forth on the swing platform, you engage not just sight and sound. The kinesthetic experience inherent in moving back and forth involves other senses traditionally seen as less relevant to aesthetic appreciation, such as the feeling of wind rushing on skin or the shifts in balance detected by the inner ear. This sort of direct physical-ness seems to be missing from Berleant’s application of the participatory model, and I believe that it would be more valuable if it explicitly incorporated direct, physical interaction with our environment. This participation applies equally to activities in our everyday environment, such as climbing a tree, as well as to art that invites this sort of participation from the viewer, such as Christo and Jean-Claude’s *The Gates*. To a ten year old, there are few things more inviting than a tree with smooth bark and a low hanging branch to allow ingress into the tree’s canopy. The latter consisted of more
http://collections.walkerart.org/item/object/788
Figure 3.3. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *The Gates*. 2005. Central Park, Manhattan. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons user MPearl.
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Gates.jpg
than 7500 saffron-colored gates along paths in Central Park in New York with nylon panels hung from them. From afar, they resembled long tunnels. The gates are evocative of Japanese torii, which generally serve to mark the entrances to Shinto shrines as well as provide an example of kire: they separate the space on either side of the gate from one another, and make us aware of the transition involved in passing through them. The Gates does this over and over, breaking up the process of moving along the park paths into pieces and making us more aware of our actions, of passing through a space that was always there, but brought to our attention by the gates’ placement.

The aesthetic value of participation in our environment, whether it is riding the swing on Arikidea, raking gravel at Ryōanji, or walking through The Gates, exists not just in the qualities of the object itself but in the act of physically engaging it as well. The forest trail’s value is not just that it disappears behind vegetation, but that you as a participant are drawn further along it, and without the physical act of movement along the path (and an agent to perform that act), there is no participation and thus no aesthetic experience. Imaginary participation, as in the when viewing photographs or paintings, can’t have such an experience because there is no interaction to be had. The physical demarcation of the physical or metaphorical frame inhibits the sort of meaningful relationship, and the ensuing effects I discussed above, that give the participatory model its value. Similarly, expanding his limited approach to actual physical participation to include interaction; not simply presence and
entering but actions such as gardening that by their very intent manipulate and alter the participant’s environment.

**Objections to My Revised Model**

The most striking difference between Berleant’s model and my revision is that mine seeks aesthetic value in an even more radical way than Berleant’s. Whereas Berleant’s model maintains a connection with traditional art in finding participatory aesthetic value in certain two dimensional works, I eschew that in favor of a more literal understanding of what it means to participate with an object or one’s environment. As such, I believe Berleant might object to my formulation’s exclusion of two-dimensional or otherwise framed works because his notion of participatory aesthetics seeks to be “a model that can be applied successfully to other, indeed all, modes of art in the form of a general theory of aesthetic experience.” ⁶ However, as stated above, I believe the most valuable point of the participatory model is not that it can encompass all types of aesthetic object. Indeed, to attempt to create a semblance of a universal aesthetic theory seems grandiose. Any theory that is expansive enough to encompass things as disparate as Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and a Japanese dry landscape garden must be extremely flexible or vague, and rather than attempt to dilute what the act of participation entails, the right path in this instance is to narrow the scope in order to make it more applicable to things that are participatory insofar as we physically interact with them, and provide an understanding that is more intricate.

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in that respect. I contend that the most value of my formulation is the implications of the model: namely, the feeling of present-ness or “here and now” and moral considerations that follow from this engagement, and in that sense, framed things are lacking in what it means to embody the participatory model because of the physical and mental separation that is inherent in the existence of a frame.

Further, I have moved the participatory model’s focus away from appreciating objects themselves and towards the relationship that we have with the object. Rather than find satisfaction in the doorway itself, we find it in the act of passing through it; rather than finding value only in the enticing qualities of a long, steep playground slide, we find it in riding down. Perhaps a challenger would suggest that this is moving away from the appreciation of our environment, and simply towards appreciation of the relationships themselves. I would counter by noting that any relationship, aesthetic or otherwise, is dependent on each of the elements involved, so aesthetic appreciation of an interaction with an object or environment is tantamount to the aesthetic value of the object itself. The relationship a visitor has with an environment is dependent on that environment, because its existence allows the action of occupying it.

But is that relationship an aesthetic one? This question is bigger, and harder to answer. Under my revision of the participatory model, we understand the aesthetic value of an environment to exist within the relationship between human and environment. Allen Carlson contends that the “conceptual grounding”7 of an aesthetic theory is that of the disinterested perspective, and models that do not depend on it to

7 Carlson, Nature and Landscape 18
without it is not a model of aesthetics; perhaps it might simply be considered a model of experience. But as the Japanese tradition demonstrates, this notion of the aesthetic requiring an isolation of the understanding of the idea is not a universal one. Georg Hegel, though he would undoubtedly disagree quite strongly with this understanding of aesthetics, nevertheless notes in the opening paragraphs of his work *The Range of the Aesthetic Defined*, that at its most essential, the term “‘[a]esthetic’ means more precisely the science of sensation.” It is in this way that I interpret ‘aesthetic.’ In this sense of being related to our sensory perception of the world, there is no doubt that my revision of participatory model qualifies as an aesthetic one. Though the term is variously understood and much discussed, this seems to get at the heart of what it means for something to be aesthetic.

**Further Possibilities for Discussion**

In my discussion, I sought to remain within two categories of things that are participatory: natural objects, and environmental art, the former understood to mean art that exists within our environment, as opposed to existing within a frame. Nevertheless, I believe that the participatory model might just as easily be applied to specific objects and actions in our everyday lives. It could be argued that there is participatory aesthetic value in the use of a vinyl record player: part of what is appealing about the process as opposed to modern digital audio players, for example.

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8 Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* 3
9 Another understanding of the term refers to art that pertains to the natural environment/environmental concerns, without any specification as to the format of the work, though the two often overlap.
is the tactile quality of the actual record, and the kinesthetic aspects of lining the needle up and dropping it down, rather than simply pressing a virtual button on a tiny screen. It could also be applied to things even more integral to our everyday lives, namely buildings and architecture. Most of the time, our environment consists of the interior of a building, and there is undoubtedly aesthetic interaction in our opening of doors, walking down hallways, or sitting and existing in classrooms and offices. A space such as a kitchen provides a particularly interesting application, where we use the tools and implements to prepare food. There is furthermore an existing discourse of the aesthetics of architecture and other designed spaces, and comparing the methods used in this field with the participatory model may lead to additional insight, though this is beyond what I hope to accomplish in this essay.

The participatory model might also be taken in another direction: instead of appreciating the more mundane, it might also be applied to the more esoteric. The burgeoning field of participatory art is an interesting one, and the ways in which technology is accommodating this expansion is worth especially fascinating. *Dolphin Oracle II* by Piotr Szyhalski is an interactive art piece at the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis, in which a CGI-animated dolphin responds in dolphin noises (which are subtitled in English) to questions that the visitor types into a keyboard. This is an interesting and puzzling case, because though it is highly interactive, there is nonetheless the barrier of the screen between our physical self and the manifestation of the work. Video games pose a similar problem. A video game, which at its core could be thought of as the process of interacting with a narrative work portrayed visually, is wholly participatory, and not just in an imagined way: I am physically
interacting with and reciprocally affecting the game. An interesting wrinkle is that I would still maintain a separation of subject and object in the physical sense: The limitation of being in front or behind the frame of the screen is still there. Given the “framed” yet multi-sensory and immersive nature of this kind of digital interaction, how might we characterize this kind of experience?

Another way in which the participatory model of environmental appreciation might be expanded is to understand the actions we take in our everyday lives as a sort of performance art with an audience of only ourselves. Performance art in the literal sense refers simply to any artistic endeavor with a component involving performance, including concerts, live theater, and dance; however, the term in a practical sense usually refers to performances that are idiosyncratic or otherwise hard to nail down. Performance art luminary Marina Abramović claims that “performance art is not about rehearsal; that’s what makes it different from theater.¹⁰” Works such as Abramović’s *The Artist is Present*, wherein the artist sat at one of two chairs at a table in the Museum of Modern Art, and invited patrons to sit across from her and exchange stares, can bring aesthetic attention to typically unexciting acts like the act of sitting still and staring straight ahead. Her performance called into question the gallery as a space to observe, and transformed it into a space to interact with something (or in this case, someone).

Finding aesthetic value in the relationship between human and environment, and the interaction that takes place is a possible gateway to interpreting the actions themselves in this aesthetic way. Instead of dwelling on the ‘here’ part of the here-

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¹⁰ Interview, *NY Magazine* Dec. 4 2005
and-now, we might strip away the context of location and environment and instead focus on the ‘now’, or what we are doing at that moment. Participatory aesthetics could well move towards this sort of performance for one. For example, in addition to finding aesthetic value in walking a garden path, we may be able to simply find value in the walk itself, as an expression of our selves. Any person walking down a garden path takes their own path dependent on their gait, what aspects of the garden attract their attention, and innumerable other aspects unique to each person. As such, we may be able to understand each of our interactions with our environment as something unique to our selves as we exist at a particular moment in time: a spontaneous performance, perhaps observed by others but only having significance to the one performing it.

Conclusion

In order to determine the most valuable model of environmental aesthetics, I have concerned myself with determining what, exactly, it means for something to be an environment. An omnipresent concern within the contemporary discourse of environmental aesthetics is that the ideal model will be true to the way that the environment actually exists, instead of imposing an overly human-centric or otherwise flawed interpretation of what an environment consists of. An environment, whether it is human-constructed or natural, is most essentially a space that is inhabited. When appreciating the environment, we must do so in virtue of our inhabitation of that space, and this means considering the constant interaction
between human and environment, which is just the technique that the participatory model calls for.

Ryōanji and Katsura Imperial Villa, as prototypical examples of dry landscape and stroll gardens, respectively, reveal the way in which Japanese gardens and the aesthetic principles that go along with them (and more universally, the notion that an aesthetic concept need not be limited to only one discipline, or even simply the realm of aesthetics) demonstrate how we might expand the participatory model of aesthetics. They illustrate how the participatory model of aesthetics characterizes our experiences of interaction with the environment as aesthetic, but nonetheless having can have profound impacts on our perspective in the general sense.

The participatory model of aesthetics as I seek to interpret it is one that maximally benefits from, and in turn improves, our relationship with the environment we inhabit. In drawing upon the interactive relationship between environment and participant as the key aspect of our aesthetic experience, we can allow for a model of aesthetic appreciation that is at once reflective of the environment as it actually is and how we as inhabitants perceive it, as well as powerful in the way it affects our general worldview. At its best, the participatory model will incorporate participation with the environment in the most direct, palpable way possible and positively influence the way in which people understand the world.
Bibliography


