



THE AESTHETICS OF ENVIRONMENT

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Descriptive Aesthetics

Chapter Three

~~~~~ The range of aesthetic inquiry has been broadening and diversifying in recent years, not just in the matters we choose to reflect on, but in the very methodology by which we inquire into them. One can, in fact, distinguish several different ways of doing aesthetics. *Substantive aesthetics* has the longest history. It comprises theories that propose positive (and sometimes negative) views about the character, experience, and meaning of art in general and about individual arts, examining their place in the order of society and the scheme of philosophy. Explanations of art as representation, as the expression of emotion, as the symbol of feeling, as a kind of language, and as an experience of empathy are familiar forms that substantive aesthetics has taken. The recent interest in *meta-aesthetics* reflects an attempt to set aside these large issues in favor of the seemingly more manageable tasks of refining the classifications, distinctions, and concepts that deal with art and the problems of aesthetics. Central here are the definition of 'art' and the various categories and consequences that follow from different proposals. For several decades these interests dominated discussion in this country, although concern with such matters has now slackened and has

combined with work on general issues in substantive aesthetics and on particular arts.

These two approaches are familiar enough, yet there is another that we must also acknowledge, for it is growing in importance. This is *descriptive aesthetics*, accounts of art and aesthetic experience that may be partly narrative, partly phenomenological, partly evocative, and sometimes even revelatory. Efforts at aesthetic description occur most often as parts of other kinds of writing—novels, poems, nature writing, criticism, philosophical aesthetics. These passages are not merely self-indulgent effusions but serious attempts to enlarge the understanding of the aesthetic domain by guiding our perception through it. Descriptive aesthetics combines acute observation with compelling language to encourage the reader toward vivid aesthetic encounters. It shares with criticism a normative interest, not, however, in its interpretive and judgmental modes, but in recognizing the central place of aesthetic appreciation and in leading the reader toward such experience.

But descriptive aesthetics goes beyond a communicative function. Its investigations also have theoretical importance, testing the meanings of art, exemplifying appreciative experience, and offering material for critical use. While a descriptive account cannot be denied or refuted as such, except for factual inaccuracies, its theoretical significance can be debated. That is what makes it philosophy and not another literary genre or scholarly discipline. By identifying and illustrating descriptive aesthetics through self-contained studies, we shall see how it can be a legitimate and valuable mode of aesthetic inquiry in its own right.

Reflective musings also have a place here. In attempting to impart their perceptions, these descriptions may include meanings associated with their observations. The ideal of pure description that Husserl envisioned turns out to rest on but another false absolute. His transcendental ego is a rarified philosophical concept, not the ultimate starting point of phenomenological reflection but the end product of the long history of subjectivism. So, too, is pure sensory description a philosophical product. Sensation does not supply the bare elements of experience, as the British empiricists would

have it. Except under experimental conditions, it is never pure or simple but combines synaesthetically in homogeneous complexity. Moreover, we understand things not just apperceptively, through the glass of previous experience: The knowledge we have acquired, the belief systems through which we order that knowledge, the associations that involuntarily attach themselves to what we see and do, the memories that add sympathetic resonance—all these inform and color our sensory experiences. Description cannot help calling on these, and by including reflection we do explicitly what we would do in any case.

Appreciative experience is, however, the focal center of aesthetic description, and this chapter and the next illustrate this kind of writing with studies of specific environmental occasions. While descriptive aesthetics is an appropriate form of inquiry in the arts, it also lends itself particularly well to environmental situations. Environment exhibits many of the qualities and features of aesthetic perception more explicitly and emphatically than in our usual encounters with the arts.<sup>1</sup> What are the characteristics of environmental perception and how do they occur? What is it to experience environment aesthetically?

Foremost is the quality of engagement, which occupies so prominent a place in these essays. The aesthetic environment is not merely a pleasing scene that lies before me as a distant view or an object framed in binoculars or bordered by the parapet of a viewing platform. It is everywhere, all about me. It includes not only what lies before my eyes but what is behind my back, beneath my feet, above my head. The aesthetic environment is not constituted primarily of visual objects: It is sensed through my feet, in the kinesthetic sensations of my moving body, in the feel of sun and wind on my skin, in the tug of branches at my clothing, in the sounds from every direction that attract my attention. The aesthetic environment is not merely a generalized sort of perceptual awareness. It possesses distinctive sensory qualities: the texture of the ground under foot, a whiff of pine needles or the organic redolence of a damp brook side, the conformation of the terrain through which I walk, the visual textures within a forest, the kinesthetic pull of a path, the feel of



the space of a woodland glade or a field. Out of these perceptual encounters emerges a rich understanding of interconnectedness; no, more than this, a living sense of the actual continuities that bind my conscious body to the places I inhabit, even if briefly. This is aesthetic engagement, and environmental perception can exemplify such experience clearly and forcefully.

A central aspect of environmental engagement is the insistent presence of sensory qualities. Unlike many arts in which one or two senses dominate our direct sensory experience with the other receptors joining in by imaginative association, environment activates the entire range of our sensory capacities. I not only see, hear, touch, and smell the places I move through: I grasp them with my feet and hands, I taste them in the air I draw in, I even adjust the way I hold and balance my body to the contours of the land and the texture of the ground under my feet. Moreover, sensory awareness does not arrive through separate channels to be joined by something like Aristotle's *sensus communis*, or common sense, in forming complete perceptions. The division of the senses is a biological separation, not an experiential one. Environmental experience, in particular, lives in the richness of sensory consciousness, an awareness that is more than fusion but rather a perceptually continuous and integrated occasion. This is true synaesthesia, a complete union of the sensory modalities.

There is, moreover, an invisible dimension to environments, just as in the more usual arts. But here again it has a strength and vividness for the body that may be more compelling than on other aesthetic occasions. Place memory appears in the recollection of earlier visits to a location, the remembrance of past times in similar places, the strange feeling of déjà vu, and in the sense of sharing the features and aura of a particular place with its earlier inhabitants. And I bring personal associations to a walk along an ocean beach, to sitting on the bank of a stream or beneath the spread of a great tree, to standing in wonder before the subtle transformations of the rising sun, to walking down a country road or across a grassy meadow.

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cognitive, acquired or unlearned, that crowd in to color the scene. Perhaps I sense the qualitative meaning of exposure when standing in the midst of a large field, in the delicate balance of my body on the edge of a cliff, in my instability when climbing among rocks. Scientific knowledge may enlarge my sensory awareness when I encounter exposed strata, a spring emerging from the ground, falling flakes of snow, or the unceasing, abrading wind as a front moves through. Poetic meanings may deepen the perception of a daisy or the ruin of a building. Perhaps it is the quality of the numinous that hypnotizes my gaze at a mountain peak or at the rush of water cascading over a falls.

Environmental experience is, then, aesthetically rich. It infuses the most exceptional occasions with deep resonances of association and meaning. And it provides an inexhaustible opportunity for enlarging our perception, for discovering ourselves in discovering our world. The sketch that follows is intended to illustrate how descriptive aesthetics can extend our grasp of environment and aesthetic perception and, in fact, of their inseparability. Perhaps it may not only exemplify the aesthetic character of environmental experience but succeed in imparting it to the reader.

#### A PADDLE ON THE BANTAM RIVER

*The Bantam River wanders for miles among the hills of northwest Connecticut, in and out of lakes and ponds until it reaches the Shepaug River. Along its course it flows through Bantam Lake, the largest (but not so large) natural lake in Connecticut. Moving northward as it leaves the lake, the Bantam River is navigable for less than half a mile before it pours over a low dam onto a rocky stretch around which the paddler must portage to continue downstream. What this short section of the river lacks in length it makes up in variety and purity and in the ease of covering the full distance. I paddled down the Bantam during the most colorful time of the fall; yet, strangely enough, what impressed me most and remains vivid in memory is not the spectacular scenery that the region displays at this season but the more subtle qualities of delicacy and intimacy.*

My canoe is a traditional craft, newly built of cedar and canvas. Its late nineteenth-century design refines the age-old lines of its native American predecessors and conveys a sense of continuity with the past, for the Potatuck, an Algonkian-speaking people, paddled these same waterways. The gleaming grain of its varnished interior speaks to the trees, which stand beyond the banks and whose use in repairing canoes damaged during wilderness trips sometimes makes that bond actual. I carry two paddles, one a beavertail design made of oiled cherry (the name will turn out to be significant), the other of ash, which I have shaved down to slender dimensions. I also have an eight-foot spruce pole to push me through hard, thin places.

Parking my car in a pull-off near the river, I hoist the canoe over my head and carry it down a winding path to the edge of the stream. As I descend the bank and prepare the canoe, I sense that I am entering a liminal state between different orders of things. It is a time of transition, when the translucence and fluidity of the water are about to replace the opaque solidity of the earth, transforming my sense of gravity and balance. I ease the canoe into the shallows and arrange myself inside, balancing against the wobbling motion of the lightweight, round-bottom craft. Instead of the ready support of firm and stable rocks and trees, an undulating surface surrounds me, its gleaming reflections mirroring the motility of the sun. Is this why the early Greeks paired fire and water as basic elements, along with earth and air? Together they signal a change in the order of my world.

Slowly I paddle under the nearby bridge and down the river until I spot a bare, gray trunk, the weathered remains of a once large tree, that stands as a sentinel marking the confluence of Butternut Brook with the Bantam. These are moments of settling into a different condition, of sensing the motion of the new entity I have become as my body joins through my knees with the hull of the canoe, and my arms replace my legs in propelling me. I notice that the sky, no longer obscured by the trees, opens now above the river, a wide band that parallels the water as I travel along this three-dimensional natural highway. The grasses, reeds, and bushes that border the river appear, from midstream, as a vague periphery, the soft border of a soft surface.

As I turn to follow the course of the stream, a barrier immedi-

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ately confronts me. A submerged log has caught floating debris and the canoe must twist among watery branches, passing awkwardly through a narrow opening with the help of the current, like any piece of flotsam. It is like moving through a gate or under an arch marking the entrance to a new precinct, for a different area opens before me, narrower and more contorted. With less visibility on all sides, I have entered the intimacy of a private place in which suspension and flux strangely combine in a dynamic equilibrium. Time, movement, and sound have metamorphosed to produce an aura that suggests the sacred, the magical, but which possesses its own peculiar identity. An excursion through a secret space is beginning.

Gently I move the canoe down the narrow, quiet stream. Details begin to emerge: clumps of grass and bush, the undulations of the shoreline, a tree with frostbitten leaves brilliant yellow in the sunlight. The course down the river is built of specific features, a continuous panorama, long rather than broad, close rather than dramatically distant. It unrolls like a nature film, except that there is nothing spectacular or startling, nothing that does not have the rarity and singularity of the ordinary world. But this is unlike a film, for I am literally in the scene, not so much inside it as an integral part of it.

Before me lies the round, gray back of a boulder, pushing above the surface like the carapace of a giant turtle, strangely solid and still in the water as the canoe floats slowly past. I am fascinated by the delicate textures of the bushes along the banks, fine tracery sometimes dotted with sprays of intense vermilion berries, like touches from a pointillist's brush. Other colors appear—scarlet leaves, intense orange and deep purple berries, tones of bark and stalk too subtle and varied for words to name. Part of the strange, even unearthly, quality of the scene comes from the reflections in the still water of the vegetation along the banks. What is visible above the surface of the water is mirrored in exact and complete detail below it. I am floating on an invisible plane between two perfectly symmetrical worlds. The borders of the stream are not so much like the frame of a painting as the periphery of my vision, blending into the distance in all directions, below as well as above.

Far ahead I sight a great blue heron motionless on a low branch



that extends over the water. These timid birds start into flight at any distant movement, yet on this occasion my heron remains remarkably poised as the canoe floats gently nearer. Perhaps I am not so much intruder as companion in this isolated world. Finally, as the canoe draws close, the bird flies off, only to surprise me just ahead as I round the next bend in the stream. The scenario is played out once again, and on the third spotting I detect a small green heron sitting obscurely close by the great blue. Then a kingfisher flies across to complete a composition that would have pleased Audubon.

Other things become apparent: the heron yet again, backlit high on a bare tree limb near the stream, a beaver lodge along the shore, puffs of breeze. Even the muffled sound from a road does not recall me to its world so much as remind me of how distant from it I am. As I move ahead, the large overhanging limbs of a tree oppose me, covering nearly the entire breadth of the narrow river. I duck under quickly as the coarse texture of the bark and the sharp stumps of broken branches appear directly before my eyes. These are no liquid images but solid, hard points capable of gouging or tearing an unwary head. Here, as with every environment, the aesthetic and the practical fuse into a single condition. The passageway now before me soon widens at a bend in the river into an impressionist landscape: golds, reds, greens, the pale blue of the sky, all duplicated on the surface of the water. Like Alice, I am in a looking-glass world.

A faint rustle and splash surprise me into the awareness that I am not alone. I nose the canoe toward the shore but can see nothing. Suddenly there is a slap on the water behind me. I turn quickly but see only ripples on the surface. Some creature is playing games with me. Then it appears downstream, a beaver, swimming ahead as I paddle toward it. Farther and farther it leads me on, rounding a bend, until finally it slaps its tail, dives, and disappears into the watery shadows along the bank.

Many sights welcome my approach: an old dock, a patch of pale dry grass with a fragile linear texture, a cove partly in shadow, the color of the foliage, all part of the moving panorama, which I activate with my paddle. A comment Thoreau once made on a river trip of his own comes to mind: "The forms of trees and groves change with

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every stroke of the oar." As the canoe follows the twists and turns of  
 the stream, the late afternoon light changes along with it. Sometimes  
 the sun is behind, illuminating the scene before me with its fiery bril-  
 liance. Sometimes it is ahead, spreading a silver gleam on the water  
 and making it opaque. Along the shore a bright red-and-white plastic  
 fishing float hangs suspended from a tangle of line, which the branches  
 once grasped from an unwary fisherman.

Other perceptions fill this world of the paddle: the call of a cat-  
 bird, the splash of my strokes, the quiet thump of the paddle's shaft  
 against the gunwale, the flutter of a small bird in the brush. And here  
 are ostentatious crows, black against the sky, flying, sitting, calling,  
 occupying the entire place for a time. The feel of the paddle or pole  
 is always in my hands, not the cold hard metal or plastic of those  
 indestructible modern sporting implements but the warm, textured  
 grain of an oiled wood surface, sometimes wet with water whose liquid  
 coolness startles my sun-heated skin, intensifying both sensations. The  
 stream broadens out and becomes pondlike, complete with a cove of  
 its own into which I poke the canoe. The varying textures and tonali-  
 ties of the grasses and reeds are inexhaustible here, endless sights in  
 this brief span of water and time. A sensuous immersion has occurred  
 in which my world is thick with the immediate presence of perception  
 and meaning, inseparable from the occasion and from each other.

I become aware of the sound of flowing water and soon spot a con-  
 duit pouring its stream into the river. The canoe approaches concrete  
 piers on either side, all that remains of a bridge. Ahead lie low indus-  
 trial rectangles backed by the trestle of a water tower, standing high  
 above the scene like a modern campanile. Calm water lies ahead, but  
 a low roar signifies a change, the threatening flow of current over  
 the small dam that, ironically, made this gentle journey possible by  
 backing up the water and deepening the stream.

In a sense, this is only half the story. The paddle back to the put-  
 in point does not so much continue the experience as become quite  
 another one. The sun has changed, and with it the light. The order  
 of encounters is reversed and the views from the opposite direction  
 completely altered. Everything is overlaid with memory and a sense of  
 return. These experiences are not as fresh as they are vaguely familiar.

*My attention is less acute and my expectation of arrival dominates the trip. I realize that this is not the other half of the story but an entirely different one.*

Like the surface of the Bantam River, this account reflects the occasion it relates. And like that surface, these reflections also join with the experience to become an entity in their own right. This clearly makes any such account different from the occasion it depicts. Can one say anything, then, of such an occurrence taken in itself? Nothing, I suspect, since the presence of an interpreter is inescapable. I can only offer a descriptive narrative with which the reader may join in creating yet another imaginative analogue. Perception and interpretation coalesce in this process: In any environmental situation, what there is depends on who you are and where you are.

Surface, moreover, is an incomplete metaphor, for this narrative does more than reflect the experience it relates. The occasion was embedded in a setting as distinctive as it was unique, thick with the substance of place and resonant with time, memory and meaning. Its peculiar ambiance had neither quality nor significance apart from my involvement. There is a double merging here, first in the original situation and then in its account, to which the reader adds still another. Yet this very fact helps us grasp one of the generic traits of such an environmental situation. For my narrative attempts to capture the extraordinary sense of a singular time and place, a condition that can no more be separated from my presence than my experience can from it. Another's description would convey quite another occasion.

This, then, is what environment is; this is what environment *means*: a fusion of organic awareness, of meanings both conscious and unaware, of geographical location, of physical presence, personal time, pervasive movement. There is no outward view, no distant scene. There are no surroundings separate from my presence in that place. There is rather a full awareness focused on the immediacy of the present situation, an engaged condition that encompasses richly inclusive perceptions and meanings, like those in the description just offered.

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Our sense of environment begins to deepen as its aesthetic dimensions emerge. Not surface, no longer surroundings, environment takes on the character of an integral whole. It becomes both the condition and content of experience in which the human participant is so absorbed into a situation as to become inseparable from and continuous with it. This is no mystical state but a specific, concrete occasion to which one's knowledge, understanding, and perceptual keenness contribute in molding its character, perhaps through acute observation, through identifying birds, flowers, or trees, through drawing connections with other times and places in personal memory and collective history, perhaps through understanding meanings and relationships. Relevant skills and previous experience are clearly important here. The description of environment will be as varied as its author.

Is descriptive aesthetics a different genre, a distinct mode of writing? In some respects it resembles both nature poetry and nature writing. Yet each of these seems to exhibit certain characteristic traits, some of which may be intrinsic, others contextual. In our skeptical age, which has demonstrated the futility of definition, sharp boundaries happily need not be drawn. Yet there are differences here. How, then, can the genres be distinguished? This is an inquiry in its own right, but we may at least note some of the features of these three literary modes to help us identify what is distinctive about descriptive aesthetics.

The description of nature in poetry has the power to invoke a presence through language that compels attention and fixes the quality of the situation. Apart from the formal devices of meter, rhyme, and traditional structure, which are no longer essential, poetry uses figurative language, often combining its meanings with techniques of sound and rhythm to evoke associations and engage our perceptual imagination. This gives poetry the capacity to lead us, as Bachelard puts it, to enter and live in the image, in "the absolute of an incredible image."<sup>2</sup> Descriptive aesthetics shares this focus on the qualitative experience of an occasion. It pursues its quest for theoretical meaning by bringing an aesthetic situation to a presence so vivid, at times, that the reader can join in the actuality of a percep-

tual encounter. Although poetry often uses natural themes to evoke larger meanings, this is not always the case. If Wordsworth had his "Daisy," he also had his humble "Celandine." The descriptive poetry of nature also has a range of powers. The modest perception Keats evokes in "On the Sea" becomes a sublime awareness in "Ode to a Nightingale."

At its best, nature writing shares this capacity to rouse our wonder of the natural world, often by encouraging us to join sympathetically in the author's peregrinations and musings. Descriptions commonly take an autobiographical form, personal accounts that are informed by the writer's observational skills, special knowledge, perceptual bent, and activities. One can learn much about the arctic wilderness and the Kentucky River valley from reading Barry Lopez and Wendell Berry. At times the history of a place fuses with the biography of the author, whose experiences may resonate in ways that can enlarge our sensibility. In the hands of some writers these descriptive accounts may have a didactic, often a moral intent, leading the reader to discover values in the natural world and develop a capacity for care and respect. Sometimes we may attain a sense of sympathetic association with the landscape, recognizing its call on us and discovering the healing and enrichment that come from a sensitivity to nature. Moreover, like landscape painting and nature poetry, nature writing may do more than convey bucolic sentiments. Such writing can reach deep into the human connections with the natural world and show the kind of harmony it is possible to achieve. Its forms of communication are varied, and at times a skillful pen can approach poetic exaltation.

Evocative description is a feature that poetry and nature writing may share. However, this trait occupies a more critical position in descriptive aesthetics, even though that is not its exclusive purpose. The language of aesthetics is more equivocal here: not primarily evocative, as in poetry; not mainly narrative, as in nature writing. That language, as we have observed, goes two ways, to the author's experience, which it relates, and to the reader's experience, which it elicits. Description changes the original experience, transmuting it



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in the writing. It creates for the reader a literary/cognitive occasion different from the one it describes. In addition, while nature poetry and nature writing depict experience in ways that encourage participation and association, aesthetics has a theoretical purpose. Here may lie its distinctive characteristic: It offers an investigation from which our knowledge of the workings of art and the aesthetic may increase. The reader's experience is different here, too. Informed, enticed into sympathetic participation, the reader is encouraged to gain the enlarged understanding that is the outcome of successful inquiry.

To some extent these literary modes are context-defined, their character directed by the intent with which they are written, such as to describe an occasion or instill moral or aesthetic awareness. And these different literatures acquire their identity, in part, from the uses to which they are put, as in exemplification or information. Descriptive aesthetics and nature writing can evoke the same sense of environmental engagement as nature poetry, and an anthology of descriptive aesthetics would certainly contain instances from all three genres. Nature poetry can embody the sensitive observations of nature writing and descriptive aesthetics. And nature writing can verge on poetry on the one hand and offer claims on how to appreciate environment, on the other. But as their purposes vary, so, in general, do their stylistic features and effects. While all three may be descriptive, the primacy of cognition, communication, or participation suggests the difference between aesthetics and these literary arts.

Important implications for aesthetic theory follow from descriptive aesthetics. A descriptive account will display the kind of active awareness that is inherent in aesthetic experience. The active and receptive aspects of such experience, what Dewey called 'doing' and 'undergoing,' are not only complementary phases but a single intense involvement without parts or divisions. The idea of aesthetic engagement identifies this participatory experience, focusing on the wholeness, the integrity of the situation. It combines with equal concentration the directness of perception and its residual meanings,

these too fused into a unity. Aesthetics can describe how this takes place on particular occasions, with nature as well as with art, and help us grasp their theoretical significance.<sup>3</sup>

Descriptive aesthetics holds implications, too, for the theory of criticism. Aesthetic description exemplifies the concentration of critical attention, not only on an object or a place, but on the course of experience of which these are but constituent parts. If, like much science, criticism confines itself to an object, then, also like science, its results will suffer the distortions of fragmentation and partiality. Criticism can glow with the illumination of the large and coherent vision that descriptive aesthetics makes possible. It then becomes, not the critical appraisal of art objects, buildings, cities, and scenes but a detailed exposure of their conditions, their qualities, their complex and dynamic processes, together with the penumbra of meanings that are the rich product of human association. Here, too, value resides in the complex of actions and transactions that constitute an aesthetic situation. Not a factor added by a distinct and separate human factor, value appears in the very heart and workings of the integrated process of aesthetic engagement.

The aesthetic description of environment is, moreover, no anomalous case. Environmental appreciation possesses characteristics that parallel the appreciative situation in film, music, and, in structurally similar ways, the other arts as well. Environmental description can serve a heuristic purpose here, for its explicitness and comprehensiveness may lead us to discover features in the experience of the various arts that have remained hidden.

Descriptive aesthetics possesses, finally, a wider significance, for it displays the falseness of a narrow aestheticism. The experience of nature is not an occasion enclosed by boundaries that protect it from the irrelevant incursions of the surrounding world. Like art, the aesthetics of nature holds great importance for the quality of experience in general. It displays the richness of the ordinary, the small, the local. It unfolds the values that reside in solitary times out of doors. It recognizes the sense of community in sharing those times with others. It exemplifies, for "civilized" people, the importance of wilderness, showing us, in fact, the parochialism in much of what

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unding world. Like art, the  
ce for the quality of experi-  
of the ordinary, the small,  
de in solitary times out of  
nity in sharing those times  
people, the importance of  
chialism in much of what

we take to be civilization. It encourages us to recognize our larger  
bond with the natural world where, indeed, we can rediscover Spi-  
noza's insight that there is no nature apart from our human presence  
and nothing human separate from nature. If art shapes experience  
to our vision of things, environment is an art, not of individuals but  
of society, the cumulative art of a culture. In helping us realize this,  
descriptive aesthetics exceeds the bounds of theory and assumes the  
role of educator, enlarging not only our personal experience but our  
social understanding as well.