On the Cusp of the Sublime: Environmental and Artistic Sublimity

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Abstract

Paradigm cases of the sublime relate to the natural environment. Is the natural environment its only domain, or is it possible to experience the sublime in works of art? I argue that the sublime originates in the natural environment, but that some works of art overcome the difficulty of its non-representational structure and provide indirect access to sublime experience. The sublime is a case in which pleasure's motivational profile may be understood differently from that of beauty. The motivational profile of the sublime in the natural environment is one of perceptual frustration, due to perception's limited capacity for representing it in its entirety. Even as far back as the Longinian tradition, we learn that the artistic sublime finds its source in the natural sublime. I argue that while the sublime originates in the natural environment, the question about whether we experience it in art hinges on the role of the imagination in the experience of the sublime. While it might be thought that experiencing beauty in imagination is less vibrant than experiencing it in perception, I argue that the sublime manifests itself primarily in the imagination, allowing for the possibility of experiencing it in some artworks.

Introduction

Paradigm cases of the sublime relate to the natural environment. Kant writes about "[b]old, overhanging and, as it were threatening cliffs, thunderclouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with all their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river". He further writes:

> But the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature.[1]

The pleasure we derive in our experience of the sublime is in human reason's being separate and free from nature's causal laws, from our capacity to judge the sublime despite its overwhelming force and greatness.

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Emily Brady writes about the sublime as a historical concept and carves out a space for its contemporary relevance.[2] Indeed, its history helps us to re-examine its status in contemporary aesthetic theory and its contribution to explanations about our relationship and ethical engagement with the natural world. Brady gathers the qualities and experiences put forward by Modern philosophers which characterize the sublime in nature and include great height or vastness (including the mathematical sublime), tremendous power (the dynamical sublime) and emotional responses "distinguished by feelings of being overwhelmed – a somewhat anxious experience, but ultimately one that feels exciting and pleasurable".[3] Emphasis is placed on loftiness, greatness and intensity, and strong emotion.

Along similar lines, Robert Clewis writes that "[t]he sublime (or sublimity) is difficult to define, and its meaning has changed over time", but "can be described as a complex feeling of intense satisfaction, uplift, or elevation, felt before an object or event that is considered to be awe-inspiring". He further writes that "[a]lthough the sublime is sometimes characterized as a complex combination of satisfying and discomforting elements, it is on the whole a positive and pleasant experience: perceivers typically desire the experience to continue."[4]

Is the natural environment its only domain, or is it possible to experience the sublime in works of art? I argue that the sublime originates in the natural environment, but that some works of art overcome the difficulty of its non-representational structure, providing indirect access to sublime experience. Experiencing the environmental sublime involves those features which Brady takes to include scale, wildness, disorder and formlessness. Those features are indicative of our relative and subjective smallness compared to the seeming expanse of nature and the universe; the experience is one of immersion that hinges on our perceptual and cognitive limitations, rather than one that necessarily dominates the natural and universal expanse.

Even though it is of a different kind, it would be shortsighted to deny the possibility of artistic sublimity. This would not only deny anecdotal evidence that links the sublime to art through the ages, starting with Longinus, but to deny the *de facto* categories of the sublime. The Tate Gallery lists various research projects on the artistic sublime, for example: the Romantic sublime, the Victorian sublime, the modern sublime, the contemporary sublime. Artists, art critics, art theorists and philosophers have variously thought certain artworks may be sublime. Indeed, even Kant may be read as infusing the experience of fine art with sublimity:

> In the experience of the natural (or pure) sublime, incomprehensibly large or mighty objects stagger the imagination and make us aware of an infinity (i.e., a rational idea) that transcends human experience; in the experience of fine art produced by genius, an aesthetic idea stretches our imagination to a point where we become aware of an infinite richness of meaning (i.e. a rational idea) that no conceptualization can fully capture. Both experiences lead us to contemplate rational ideas, which are beyond finite human understanding. This parallelism between genius and the sublime, whereby both direct our awareness towards the idea of infinity, is compelling.[5]

There is ongoing discussion between Uygar Abaci and Clewis on whether Kant thought the artistic sublime was possible.[6] Ultimately, I disagree with Abaci that the artistic sublime is not possible, just as I disagree with Clewis that experiencing the sublime is merely about perception, in which case the sublime is available to both art

and nature. I agree with Brady about the ontological difference between the environmental and artistic sublime, that the original sublime resides in nature. However, without wading into exegetical matters related whether or not the artistic sublime is possible according to Kant, I do think that the artistic sublime is possible. Along these lines, I think that the artistic sublime can be separated into the philosophical categories (cf. artistic categories) of the sublime as it relates to style and the sublime as it relates to grandeur and infinity tinged both with pleasure and displeasure.

I argue that the imagination plays a central role in the to-ing and fro-ing of attention from external formlessness to inner experience in addition to perception. The pleasure of our experience of the sublime is grounded in the imagination's incapacity to fully represent it, yet we nevertheless have the capacity to grasp it. This capacity to grasp the sublime despite its overwhelming and threatening qualities, constitutes us as moral and reflective subjects when faced with the threat of chaos, danger and destruction.[7] This prima facie seems to indicate a symmetry in our experience of the sublime in the natural environment and our experience of the sublime in art. However, our experience of the sublime in the natural environment is more fundamental in the immediacy with which it reminds us of our place not only in relation to overwhelming, overpowering natural objects, but in relation to the magnitude of the universe. Not only do we feel that it can constitute us as moral and reflective subjects, it reminds us of our smallness and expendability on a scale of vastness incomprehensible to us.[8]

I begin by presenting varieties of the sublime in order to home in on admittedly Western versions that apply to the environment and to art. I then contrast how form (ordinarily related to beauty), anti-form and formlessness (ordinarily related to the sublime) are cognitively processed (or not) before looking at case studies drawn from Richard Serra, Robert Smithson and Olafur Eliasson. *Earthworks* and *Land Art*, I argue, are the closest to achieving the original, environmental sublime. This is because the environmental sublime's formlessness frustrates perception and the imagination such that it fundamentally relates to subjective physical and mental constitutions, our very existence, in a way artworks do not, or do so derivatively.

Varieties of the Sublime

Something's being sublime is equivocal between different readings, each of which contributes to a rich possibility of readings. To begin with, cultural and historical variations of the sublime extend beyond the Western framework, with extracts from Bharata-Muni, Guo Xi and Zeami Motokiyo having recently been included in Clewis' recent anthology.[9] Conversely, in her article on "The Japanese Appreciation of Nature", Yuriko Saito writes that the sublime is not a feature of the Japanese appreciation of nature: "Even when a grand landscape is appreciated, it is not the grandeur or awesome scale of the scene but rather its composition compressed into a compact design that is praised".[10]

Clewis' inclusion of ancient and non-Western extracts is welcome, offering contrasts and comparisons that may be made in relation to classically Western conceptions. I will set these approaches aside since in the Bharata-Muni case, it resembles the case of the sublime as an artistic style as advanced by Longinus, for example, below, which I will also be setting aside for the purposes of my argument. Since the environmental sublime as such does not feature in the Japanese appreciation, I also set this aside, even though it would be interesting to explore the perceptual and cognitive divergence between classically Japanese and Western readings of the sublime.

On one classically Western reading, the sublime traditionally relates to literature and rhetoric, but this version of the sublime extends to other artforms, such as painting, sculpture, the theatre, music and opera. Poignancy is central to the combination of form and content in which positive and negative feeling combine to elicit exquisite sentiment. On Suzanne Guernac's reading, an art of the sublime in Longinus "implies a mixture of nature and art", nature being the origin of artistic genius.[11] In literature and rhetoric, the sublime is "a power that springs either from the grandeur of the thought and the nobility of the feeling, or from the splendor of the words or from the harmonious, poignant and vivid turn of phrase".[12] Excellence in writing expresses elevated thought and has come to be known as a style.[13] However, here again, there is an equivocation between sublimity's being part of the stylistic features of literary or rhetorical discourse and it relating to the external objects represented in literary content. The first identifies a quality of expression and the latter a quality of the represented object, albeit a quality that transcends its represented properties. Longinus, for example, refers to passages in Homer's *Odyssey* in which he describes the heroes and combats of the gods.[14] A similar example is the sublimity that may be found in the anguished, sculptural form and overwhelming emotional content of the *Laocoön*.[15]

This version of the sublime, exquisiteness, poignancy, resonates with Wicks' thought that the artistic sublime is possible according to Kant.[16] Here, I take it for granted that stylistic features of literary or rhetorical discourse as related to content form a category of the artistic sublime. I set it aside in order to address more closely the distinction between the artistic and environmental sublime.

On another reading, the sublime may be seen to be connected with politics, for example with Edmund Burke's seminal theory linking it with terror and the passions of pleasure and pain. For Burke, the sublime is grounded in the fear of death and need for social and self-preservation when encountering vastness, infinity, obscurity and power.[17] Here, there are two further equivocations: the first being vastness, infinity, obscurity

and power as they relate to the external objects of nature; the second being its close ties with the related concept of awe and violence in revolution that bring us to reflections on the ends of society and self-preservation, as Brady writes.[18] I set this version of the sublime aside, since I am here not concerned with the political dimension of the sublime, but the difference between the environmental sublime and the artistic sublime.

On yet another reading of the sublime, are the qualities that relate it to the natural environment. This is the version I will principally be interested in. Together with his emphasis on the natural environment, Kant brings into focus the dynamical and mathematical sublime. In experiencing the mathematical sublime, we can conceive of the possibility of infinity by means of our mathematical concepts. It is through our aesthetic intuition, however, that we can conceive of the idea of infinity, even though we cannot apprehend it in its full expanse. In experiencing the dynamic sublime, we can be conscious of nature's powerful and violent forces only from a position of distance and safety that enables us to constitute our capacity for judging nature without fear, which includes the judging of natural forces within us. In both cases, we recognize our capacity for reason, our ability to "become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us".[19]

What is the sublime? Contrasted with beauty, "the sublime is a different matter", writes Iris Murdoch:

> As described by Kant, the sublime is not connected with art at all. While the beautiful is an experience of the imagination and the understanding of harmony, the sublime is an experience of the imagination and the reason in conflict. Whereas the beautiful reposes us, the sublime rends us. It is an emotional experience resulting from the defeated yet invigorating attempt of reason to compass the boundlessness and formlessness of nature. Confronted with some vast prospect, the starry sky, or the Alps, the imagination and the senses cannot properly take in what lies before them, that is they cannot satisfy the reason, which demands a total complete ordered picture. Yet in being so defeated the reason gains a fresh sense of its own independence and dignity. Since reason *is* the moral will, the experience of the sublime is a sort of moral experience, that is, an experience of freedom.[20]

Kant's version of the sublime connects with nature and contributes to his understanding of our place in relation to it, and our status as independent and free, despite our limited perceptual abilities to apprehend it in all its grandeur. As such and given nature's indeterminacy beyond how it appears to us, we are not in the position of having privileged access to it in itself. Nor can we gain knowledge about it except through ideas that are mediated by the limits of our perceptual capacities to apprehend it in its entirety. On this picture, one difference that we might note between aesthetically experiencing nature and art, is that with art we know that it was created by an artist whose intentions, motivations, methods may be known. In all likelihood, artists are themselves limited in their capacity to create a work that is perceptually frustrating on the scale experienced in nature.

The difference between experiencing the sublime in nature, and experiencing the sublime in art will be addressed below, having looked more closely at what it is to experience the sublime, taking into special consideration the difference between form, antiform and formlessness to make the point that formlessness is the very feature of the environmental sublime that frustrates our perceptual and cognitive mechanisms.

Experiencing the Sublime, Perception and the Imagination

It is useful, as a starting point, to distinguish the sublime from beauty, as Kant himself does. Kant writes:

> The most important and intrinsic difference between the sublime and the beautiful, however, is this: that if, as is appropriate, we here consider first only the sublime in nature […], natural beauty (the self-sufficient kind) carries with it a purposiveness in its form, through which the object seems as it were to be predetermined for our power of judgment, and thus constitutes an object of satisfaction in itself, whereas that which, without any rationalizing, mere in apprehension, excites in us the feeling of the sublime, may to be sure appear in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that.[21]

Natural beauty is predisposed to our perceptual faculties and beautiful objects are discrete objects judged with ease by our perceptual faculties. The natural sublime, on the other hand, is not so predisposed, since it is formless, boundless, disordered and beyond the capacity of our perceptual faculties and defeats reason. Experiencing the sublime is a state of perceptual motivation that negotiates discomforting and satisfying elements, as Clewis notes. It is a somewhat anxious experience, but one that feels exciting and pleasurable, as Brady writes.

However, it is in this moment of perceptual frustration and defeat, it is in the sublime's rendering the limits of perception and reason, that we constitute ourselves as free, independent and moral subjects vulnerable to external sources. How are we to distinguish the perceptual motivation that negotiates the discomforting, anxious, and satisfying, pleasurable elements in our experience of the sublime from our experience of the bounded forms of beauty?

We might start with more contemporary accounts of process fluency in the experience of beauty than that provided by Kant, or indeed Murdoch, to create a contrast with and shed light on the experience of sublimity. This will bring into focus the complexities that emerge from the controversy of whether the sublime is applicable to art.

Recent research in cognitive science informs us that the perpetuation of pleasure in our experience of beauty motivates our attention to beautiful objects, including their non-aesthetic features. "Process fluency" accounts for the idea that our experience of beauty is processed with low effort and at high speed.[22] For Jérôme Dokic, for example, process fluency combines with our motivational profile, or self-sustaining attention. Our motivational attention in turn consists in metacognitive feeling and a dual aspect view, in which a positive aesthetic judgment is compatible with unresolved cognitive disfluency. Taken together, these explain the sustained attention we give to beautiful objects. The experience thus consists of both the object's representational features (the features perceived) and subjective features that culminate in and are instantiated at the phenomenological level.

For Dokic, process fluency relates intimately with epistemic, or metacognitive, feelings "subtle affective states that can feed into reliable judgments about a subject's epistemic state, the familiarity and perceptual confidence" they have in relation to an object.[23] The ascription of aesthetic properties, or aesthetic value, to an aesthetic object is dependent on the subject's prior complex of perceptual, and other, knowledge. Aesthetic experience is about the epistemic feeling of 'pleasingness', an aesthetic state of affairs in which fluency is caused by non-aesthetic properties.

Because process fluency does not in itself motivate sustained attention in the aesthetic object, and because artists create works that deliberately frustrate fluency and the feeling of pleasure, Dokic calls for a further stipulation, the "dual-aspect view", in which a positive aesthetic judgment is compatible with unresolved cognitive disfluency. The idea is that both familiarity and novelty are required for sustained attention. This explains the aesthetic motivational profile that combines pleasure and the sustained attention we have in our experience of aesthetic objects even in the case of objects that are difficult to process immediately.

This contrast between process fluency and disfluency with respect to incongruous objects that are deliberately and perceptually frustrating may be further developed when considering the experience of the sublime in nature. In this case we encounter objects, events or spaces in nature that are formless, awe-inspiring and discomforting. The experience is nevertheless pleasurable and positive despite its being cognitively disfluent. Dokic's integration of process fluency, metacognitive feeling and the dual-aspect view seem to resonate with accepted accounts of the experience of beauty that find their origins in Kant's articulation. Yet it points to a limit in human experience, when our faculties are confronted with perceptually and cognitively incongruous and overwhelming phenomena and limited in our capacity to process them.

Where beauty is typically associated with form, is perceptually circumscribed, engaged with in perception, the sublime is typically associated with formlessness and is not perceptually circumscribed in perception. The sublime cannot be cognitively integrated or satisfy human reason to the same extent as beauty can: it presents us with limitations that cause us to reflect on those limits, our subjective smallness in relation to grand, vast, incongruous, potentially violent external objects and events. Those limits circumscribe us in such a way that despite our frustration in attempting to make sense of the sublime's boundlessness and formlessness in nature. We introspect, recognize our capacity for reason as moral beings who have independence and dignity, as stated by Murdoch above.

This sort of account might lead to the conclusion that the sublime applies both to art and nature. Indeed, intuition says so: various interpretations of sublimity have populated discourse on art, to include novels, poetry, music, photography, the digital world. It might be thought that the paradox of the sublime applies to art in the way that the paradox of tragedy and the paradox of horror do. The paradox of the sublime might be formulated in two ways. The first is the idea that while it is beyond our cognitive ken, we still experience it despite the limitations of our cognitive powers. The second is the idea that we are at once drawn to sublime experience, want to sustain it, despite not being able to wholly represent it in perception or despite not being able to comprehend it despite its formlessness.[24]

The idea of 'formlessness' merits unpacking in arguing for the priority of the environmental sublime. The case for prioritizing the natural or environmental sublime, as articulated by Brady, emerges from the consideration of paradigm cases offered in the history of the concept. The original sense of the sublime is thus located in the natural environment and environmental phenomena. The sublime aggregates central, typical features, that include formlessness; greatness or power; disorder and wildness; subjective, physical vulnerability and affect that involves metaphysical and relational qualities.[25]

Citing architecture, sculpture and land art, Clewis critiques Brady where formlessness is concerned. He writes:

> The notion of *formlessness* has to be handled with care. Assuming that every object that we are able to experience has a spatiotemporal form, an experienced object cannot be formless. […] But once we allow for that, it is no longer clear why artistic objects must be excluded from the set of objects that have apparent formlessness. A similar response can be made of the other features of the paradigmatic sublime.[26]

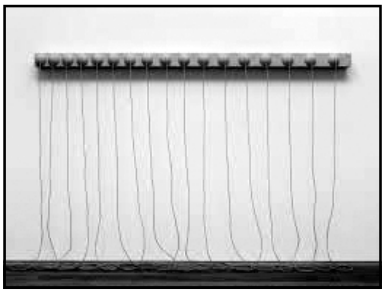
Yet it might be argued that is not just formlessness that makes the sublime identifiable in experience, but the complex of features of which it is a part, including greatness or power, disorder and wildness and subjective vulnerability. It may be that architecture, sculpture and land art push similar perceptual limits, but not to the same extent that the environmental sublime can, given that they do not include all the features Brady identifies as being central to it. The natural and environmental sublime may just belong to a different ontological and metaphysical category. To substantiate these thoughts, let's first take a closer look at formlessness, how it differs from form and anti-form and the distinction I draw between the sublime and the beautiful based on Dokic's integration of process fluency, motivational profile, metacognitive feeling and the dual-aspect view above.

Formlessness might first be contrasted with the nearby concepts of form and anti-form. Form is typically associated with beauty. On a Kantian account, we take pleasure in a beautiful object in perception, in our purposive cognition of it, through the free play of the imagination and understanding. According to Paul Guyer, "Kant equates a beautiful object's form of purposiveness with the 'purposiveness of its form' (§13), understood as a property of the spatiotemporal form of objects narrowly understood."[27] The idea of form, as it applies to both art and nature, fits with process fluency: our subjective perceptual powers assimilate the aesthetic object's properties with ease and fluidity and of which we experience pleasure.

The idea of anti-form, or the in-form and formlessness, arose in response to Minimalist, Conceptual artforms that typified early to mid-twentieth century post-Minimalist art in the United States. Anti-form artists worked on creating chance and organic processes which determined the form of their sculptures: the form of their artworks was derived from the qualities of their chosen materials rather than the imposition or creation of order. The emphasis on materials reflected a concern with context, rather than a focus on an artwork's pure form. Their materialism recalls Georges Bataille's valorization of the 'informe', formlessness, where the process of 'making', a concern with the processes of manipulating materials, takes precedence over their constitution into some object.[28] Bataille writes:

> Thus *formless* is not only an adjective with a certain meaning, but a term serving to deprecate, implying the general demand that everything should have a form. That which it designates has no rights to any sense, and is everywhere crushed under foot like a spider or a worm. For the satisfaction of academics, the universe must take shape. The entirety of philosophy has no other end in view: it puts a frock-coat on that which is, a frock-coat of mathematics.[29]

Eva Hesse's work in materials such as latex, fiberglass and plastics, is considered as being central to the Anti-Form movement, having participated at the John Gibson Gallery exhibition of the same name in 1968. Examples of her pieces are *Addendum* [1967], a large sculptural wall installation made with seventeen light grey paper mâché hemispheres that are systematically arranged at increasing intervals on a wooden bar coated in the same material.



Another piece is *Tomorrow's Apples* [1967], a relief piece in which she uses enamel, gouache, varnish, cord and papier mâché on board.

In an interview with Cindy Nemser for *Artforum* in May 1970, she says:

> I am interested in solving an unknown factor of art and an unknown factor of life. For me it's a total image that has to do with me and life. It can't be divorced as an idea or composition or form. I don't believe art can be based on that.[30]

Lynda Benglis might also be cited as a sculptor and visual artist who made wax paintings and poured latex sculptures. Her works include *Quartered Meteor* [1969, Cast 1975] and *Untitled* [1972].

The former is an iron cast of the form originally made from piled layers of polyurethane foam. The latter is a beeswax, damar resin and pigment piece on wood.

I bring in these accounts of form, anti-form and formlessness as they apply to art alongside artistic sublimity to demonstrate that they are within the purview of Dokic's schema. We have seen that the form of a spatio-temporally located aesthetic object is processed fluently. As a species of incongruous objects, formless or anti-formal works of art slow down perceptual and intellectual cognitive processing. The motivational profile and dual-aspect view kick in, both in self-sustaining attention as we familiarize ourselves with the work, an experience which is ultimately pleasurable. Here, form and anti-form are perceptually constrained. But what of formlessness as it relates to the artistic and natural sublime?

Dokic discusses Richard Serra's work in the context of the aesthetic motivational profile, in which "our aesthetic experience is *self-sustaining* insofar as it motivates us to *maintain* our cognitive relation (whether perceptual or intellectual or both) to the aesthetic object" and the dual-aspect view, which permits a resistance or delay so that we are "primitively motivated to continue to attend to it".[31] This explains our sustained attention to incongruous, or formless, aesthetic objects and the role of learning for sustained attention to unfamiliar or non-classically beautiful works of art.

Arc [1980]

The Tilted Arc [1981]

Artworks on the scale Serra's sculptures, such as *Arc* [1980] and *The Tilted Arc* [1981], both made of steel have been described as being sublime.[32] *New Yorker* art critic, Peter Schjeldahl, writes that the sublime experience is "beauty combined with something unpleasant", which he attributes to Serra's work:

> Apropos the sublime, there's possible unpleasantness galore about Serra's sculpture: gross materiality, bombastic scale, and perhaps the all-time aesthetic quintessence of passive aggression. You can't not think of the artist's willfulness. […] But [the Tilted Arc] also illustrates, by overbalancing, the dynamic of the sublime – the affront, the seduction – that Serra usually keeps in splendid tension.[33]

Patrick Mccaughey, art critic writing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, writes the following:

> Serra similarly achieves the sublime effect, a consistent hankering in American art from Thomas Cole to Barnett Newman. What makes Serra's sublime so plausible, so truly American is the industrial mode of production; engineering and the machine are vital to its existence. The hard facts of American life and its highest aspirations meet triumphantly in his work.[34]

In the context of his discussion on process fluency, the motivational profile and dual-aspect view, Dokic describes Serra's work as being 'monumental':

> Another example is provided by some of Richard Serra's monumental sculptures, which are slightly tilted. The spectator might feel some incongruity between the vertical orientation of the sculpture as seen and as experienced via her vestibular system. As a result, she might feel mildly anxious, as if the sculpture were going to fall down, although it is not clearly perceived as tilted. This unusual tension is interesting, and might initiate a dynamic aesthetic experience. […][T]he low-level tension may eventually be resolved at a higher, conceptual level, and the artwork become slightly boring, but we can still find further interest in the thought that it invites us to go beyond the usual transparency of sensory experience and reflect on the puzzle of our perceptual relation to the world.[35]

The incongruity that Dokic attributes to the experience of Serra's sculpture relates to the disorientation and destabilization one feels as the brain tries to process information about head positioning, spatial orientation and motion. The experience is thus self-sustaining as we try to maintain our cognitive and bodily relation with it.

Despite this experiential incongruity, Serra's sculpture itself displays form. Indeed, he is often described as a formalist, an artist concerned with material, art as pure form rather than narrative content.[36] It is an example of the beauty Schjeldahl identifies with the sublime, and the unpleasantness it invokes in our vestibular system. It is an instance of delayed processing that fits in with Dokic's theory.

One might wonder, however, whether it can properly be called sublime if one of the distinguishing features of the sublime is formlessness in addition to its scale, or its being monumental in size.[37] It is not formless, or 'informe', in Bataille's sense or in the sense taken up by the anti-form movement of Hesse and Benglis, which in part was distinguishing itself from Minimalism of which Serra was a representative, since anti-form was preoccupied with working from materials rather than imposing a pre-existing and predefined formalist structure on materials. This is not to deny the disorienting or destabilizing experience we might have of Serra's sculpture, or the slowing down of our cognitive mechanism as we seek to understand works of anti-form exemplified in Hesse and Benglis' works.

Serra's sculpture is not formless in the Kantian sense either, where formlessness in nature is what beautiful form is not. Brady writes, for example:

> That Kant is so careful to distinguish beautiful form from sublime formlessness suggests the indispensable role played by formlessness in our response. Our response is essentially shaped by the way the appearance of formlessness engages yet finally overwhelms imagination. The aesthetic apprehension of this formlessness is what engages the mind in the particular way that gives rise to displeasure and pleasure, awareness of the ideas of reason, and the judgment of ourselves as sublime. So, even if ungraspable, the appearance of formlessness in a sublime object, arguably, plays just as important a role to the features of natural objects as form does in the beautiful object.[38]

Indeed, in her recent book on the sublime, Brady identifies scale, wildness and disorder in addition to formlessness. While scale, wildness and disorder might independently feature in some artworks considered to be sublime and some poetry depicts our imagina-

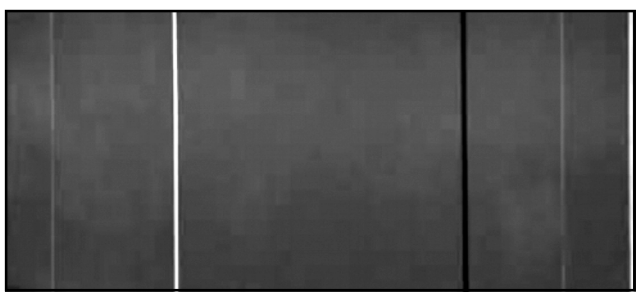
tive capacities in relation to the sublime, it is unclear that any artwork displays the combination of all the features that she has identified as being central to the sublime.

The point here is not to deny the possibility of artistic sublimity in all its manifestations, which ought to be spelled out in different terms from the environmental sublime. Rather, the point is to eventually draw attention to the idea that the environmental sublime transcends Dokic's sophisticated explanation of the perceptual and cognitive processes that typify aesthetic experiences of art, even in cases where aesthetic experience is self-sustaining.

That is to say, the formlessness of the sublime in nature forces introspection and internal imaginative engagement due to perception's limited capacities for engaging with all the features Brady identifies with the environmental sublime. While the artistic sublime can push our perceptual limits and cause vestibular disorientation, artistic intentionality and viewer interpretation provide explanations both for the artwork's structure and for our experience of it. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine how it would be possible for artworks to be sublime on the scale and with the features presented in the environment given our place in it, rather than the other way around.

Artists active during the Romantic period were inspired by sublime landscapes and typically involved "some great landscape, perhaps with a human subject depicted as a tiny figure amongst nature, or a stormy seascape with a ship tossed around in high seas" as well as dramatic landscapes, to include mountains, waterfalls, canons.[39] Caspar David Friedrich is held up as a paradigm with *Wanderer Above the Sea Fog* [1818], although I prefer a similarly inspired, more recent piece by Elina Brothenus, *Der Wanderer* [2004]:

Barnett Newman is held up as a Modernist paradigm of the American Sublime with *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* [1951] [40]:



I agree with Brady that most works of art simply do not possess the scale, formlessness, wildness and disorder of the environmental sublime. Although Serra's sculpture and Newman's paintings have scale, they also have form and order. Although Friedrich and Brothenus depict wildness, they are limited by the medium of painting and photography respectively, constrained by bounded forms.[41]

The artworks that have reached the limits of our perceptual capacities in the environmental sublime and seem to meet Brady's criteria are *Earthworks*, *Land Art* or artworks which themselves draw directly from the natural environment. Examples of two such artworks include Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* [1970] and, more recently, Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* [2016], even if for different reasons.

Robert Smithson's Land Art had as its purpose not only to work outside of the confines of the gallery, and more directly in relation to the natural world, but to resist being obfuscated by the abstractions and concepts that were clouding both the land ethic and the artworld.[42] He wrote that he was for an art that took into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation. This applied to parks, gardens and landscapes that were pictorial in their origins and the aesthetic preserves of Modernism. Smithson was concerned with connecting the formal characteristics of artistic work with the nature of perception and by drawing attention to "infernal regions – slag heaps, strip mines and polluted rivers" about which we are confused and that do not call to mind nostalgia about an idealized past or present.

The *Spiral Jetty*, writes Arthur Danto, "transcends the 'earth art' genre to which critics have consigned it, and has become an emblem of the American sublime". Danto provides the following description, which merits being cited in full:

> It is made of black basalt boulders, bulldozed into a straight line that stretches, jetty-like, 1,500 feet from the eastern shore in the upper reaches of the Great Salt Lake, terminating in a spiral with three whorls. From the air it has the look of a bishop's crosier with an unusually ornamental crook. It has a way of disappearing and reappearing, which somehow gives it a touch of magic. Soon after it was made, it was submerged beneath the saline water that gives the lake its name, and on re-emerging at a later time, when the water-level fell, it was covered with a dense patina of salt crystals. It is reached with difficulty, requiring a trek over rutted roads, and there is no guarantee that it will be visible when one gets there; I failed to see it on the two occasions I made the attempt. So the work is as elusive as it is compelling, and though it belongs to its moment in history, it has the timeless air of some ancient monument left behind by a vanished civilization.[43]

Smithson sought an immediate engagement with the natural environment that would connect us with its metaphysical and imaginative dimension. While most art struggles with the metaphysical dimension of sublime experience combined with scale, wildness and feelings of fear and vulnerability, Smithson succeeds. Smithson himself writes:

> As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. The site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the *Spiral Jetty*. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence.[44]

Remarkable about the *Spiral Jetty* is the direct engagement with the site of the work, sensitivity to what Smithson calls 'abstract geology', where "[o]ne's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart deposits of gritty reason".[45] Smithson is playing with metaphors that relate the human mind and existence with the natural environment. He pushes perceptual and embodied experience to limits that may remind us of the sublime, but the spiral, formal, quality of the work are not evocative of the formlessness that the environmental sublime evokes.

This is no criticism of the work, because an artist would have to be able to step outside of themselves and claim domination over nature's own forces. Smithson's work does not seek to dominate nature. While some think that the Kantian sublime "is a feeling of pleasure in the superiority of our reason over nature that involves displeasure", I disagree.[46] In his chapter on the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant rather articulates a metaphysics of pure sensibility, or intuition to which reason is pursuant.[47]

Our feeling of the sublime in nature is a feeling of inward reason linked both with humility and a recognition and exercise of reason with respect to our actions and our engagement with nature, which is evoked in the *Spiral Jetty*. It captures the imagination and "function[ing] in different ways which become significant for fashioning the character of the sublime response, through expansion and freedom, acts of association, and the admiration which follows from its activity".[48] Smithson's is not a work of domination over nature through idealism. He writes that nature is "not a condition of the ideal" and does not "proceed in a straight line", but is "sprawling development" that is "never finished".[49]

For his part, Eliasson created an installation, *Ice Watch* [2015], of a circle of icebergs on the Place du Panthéon during the Climate Change COP-21 Conference that took place in Paris in December 2015. Together with geologist Minik Rosing, Eliasson took twelve chunks of free-floating glacial ice from Greenland's Nuuk Fjord and brought them to Paris, where they placed them in a circle in front of the Panthéon, former church dedicated by King Louis the XVth to Saint-Genevieve and current monument housing a crypt for important French historical figures, on Place de Panthéon. The melting of the chunks served as a reminder of global warming, melting polar regions and the current environmental crisis.

The icebergs were moved to Paris[50] from Nuuk, in Southern Greenland, with the help of Rosing and Kuupik Kleist, the former Prime Minister of Greenland who captained the tugboat carrying the icebergs. The installation played on temporality: both in terms of indicating the passing of geological time through the arrangement of the icebergs in the shape of a clock face and the *in situ* observation of the icebergs melting in 'real' time. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Cynthia Zarin quotes Eliasson:

> A circle is like a compass. It leaves navigation to the people who are inside it. It is a mistake to think that the work of art is the circle of ice – it is the space it invents. And it is on a street in Paris – and a street in Paris can't be more important than it right now. We all feel that strongly.[51]

Eliasson was keen to "tell the story of climate change" and bring its effects to the heart of a densely populated city, where its inhabitants and visitors could come into direct contact with the harvested ice, feeling it as it melts away. The idea was to "create massive behavioural change" and "emotionalizing data [about climate change] by mak[ing] it physically tangible".[52] People were able to stand amongst, touch, lick, feel their warmth relative to the icebergs in addition to hearing the sounds it made as it cracked and popped. The sounds emitted by the melting ice, the released "air bubbles between the snowflakes" and the layered appearance of compressed snow, which had fallen "for tens of thousands of years", activated the imagination's engagement with the formlessness of a different temporal dimension, a temporal dimension seemingly outwith the bounds of perceptual experience proper. Rosing was quoted as saying:

> It sounds so beautiful. That is air that was trapped before we started polluting the atmosphere. Those bubbles have almost half the CO_2 content as the air outside the iceberg. It was trapped maybe 10,000 years ago, maybe 100,000, so you can smell what air used to smell like before we polluted it. And you can take a drink of it, beautiful, natural water.[53]

Eliasson opened up a space in the urban landscape for city-dwellers, surrounded by the administrative, religious, financial and university structures permeated with cultural history, to sensibly enter an imagined time and space reminiscent of nature's grandeur. It connects with what Ronald Hepburn called the 'metaphysical imagination', "which sees or seems to see some disclosure of how the world ultimately is".[54] We imaginatively experience, by contrast with the familiar urban buildings and landscape, the segments of a polar scene, ice and snow, as revealing something fundamental about how things really, or ultimately are. Through the work's formal and sensorial presentation, the imagination fills up with imagined polar landscapes, the vastness and slowness of geological time relative to time as we ordinarily measure it.

Still, both Smithson and Eliasson function within the remit of Dokic's Kantian conception of aesthetic experience detailed above, since experiencing both works entails self-sustaining attention to incongruous perceptual elements in which we are immersed. It encourages an active cognitive relation to those perceptual elements, affects the vestibular system given their size and immersive qualities. The imagination is central to the experience since it negotiates the dual-aspect of disfluency, or incongruity, and subjective aspects related to the self. This chimes with Brady's view of the interplay between external qualities and the internal constitution of the self in sublime experience.[55]

However, they do not achieve the scale, the immensity and grandeur that is to be found in nature. We know of their intentions and are in direct relation to nature, their form, do not frustrate perception or force the internal imagination to consider our existential state and subjectivities in direct relation to the environment.

Although Dokic does not directly address the sublime as a concept in his article as such, Brady resists the idea that artworks are evocative of the original sublime, which she takes to be the natural, or environmental, sublime. I agree with this assessment for the principal reason that the central qualities, and in particular formlessness, identified by Brady in relation to the environmental sublime undermine the idea that the human mind exceeds nature. Although Berleant ultimately critiques the Kantian sublime, he writes in relation to it:

> The boundlessness of the natural world does not just surround us; it assimilates us. Not only are we unable to sense absolute limits in nature; we cannot distance the natural world from ourselves in order to measure and judge it with complete objectivity. Nature exceeds the human mind, not just because of the limits of our present knowledge, not only because of the essentially anthropomorphic character and boundaries of our cognitive process, but by the recognition that the cognitive relation with things is not the exclusive relation or even the highest one we can achieve.[56]

Because the sublime in nature exceeds the human mind and because of the limits of our knowledge, the essentially anthropomorphic character and boundaries of our cognitive process, artists (through no fault of their own) cannot achieve nature's, or indeed the universe's, immensity in its presentation or creative possibilities, in the creation of their artworks. It is *because of* the formlessness and associated criteria of the natural sublime, because the experience has no spatiotemporal form that we turn inwards to discover our subjectivity, our reason, our freedom, our capacity for morality and metaphysical imagination. While we might be able to attribute the sublime to artworks such as Serra's, Smithson's and Eliasson's, or even that of the Romantics, we may only do so in a qualified sense.

Notes

[1] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 144–45.
[2] Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*; Brady, "Imagination and Freedom in the Kantian Sublime"; Brady, "Reassessing Aesthetic Value of Nature in the Kantian Sublime"; Brady, "The Environmental Sublime."
[3] Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 217.
[4] Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 1.
[5] Wicks, "Kant on Fine Art: Artistic Sublimity Shaped by Beauty," 191.
[6] Abaci, "Kant's Justified Dismissal of Artistic Sublimity"; Abaci, "Artistic Sublime Revisited: Reply to Robert Clewis"; Clewis, "A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity."
[7] Along these lines, we might be reminded of Sartre's *facticity*. Experiencing the sublime is a salient example of recognizing one's contingency when confronted with *nothingness*, in the face of which we recognize the foundation of the self, one's conscious emergence from unreflective to reflective being or consciousness, the need to reclaim and dominate one's escape into internal reflections, the recognition that we are free, in the end, to make choices. Sartre, *L'être et Le Néant*, 185–206.
[8] Hepburn, "Knowing (Aesthetically) Where I Am."
[9] Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 44–61.
[10] Saito, "The Japanese Appreciation of Nature," 240.
[11] Guernac, "Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime," 277.
[12] Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 57.
[13] Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 10–12.
[14] This example is cited in Brady, 12.
[15] Greenberg, C, "Towards a Newer Laocoon"; Newman, "The Sublime Is Now"; Winckelmann, "Laokoon."
[16] Even though Kant is primarily concerned with nature, he cites the pyramids in Egypt and Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome as examples of the mathematical sublime: "For here there is a feeling of the inadequacy of [the spectator's] imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, in which the imagination reaches its maximum and, in the effort to extend it, sinks back into itself, but is thereby transported into an emotionally moving satisfaction." Wicks carefully makes the point that "Kant's conception of the sublime is often more appropriate to describe how aesthetic ideas express moral ideas and how we regard works of artistic genius with an attitude of axe and respect". Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §26, 136; Wicks, "Kant on Fine Art: Artistic Sublimity Shaped by Beauty," 192.
[17] For various discussions on Burke's political sublime see: Binney, "Edmund Burke's Cosmopolitan Aesthetic"; Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, 78; Hinnant, "Shaftesburry, Burke, and Wollstonecraft"; White, S.K, "Burke on Politics, Aesthetics, and the Dangers of Modernity"; White, "Desperately Seeking Marie? A Response to Linda M.G. Zerilli"; Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill*.
[18] Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 22.
[19] Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology"; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §28, 147.
[20] Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," 249.
[21] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §23, 129.
[22] Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman, "Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience?"; Schaeffer, *L'expérience Esthétique*; Dokic, "Aesthetic Experience as Metacognitive Feeling? A Dual-Aspect View."
[23] Dokic, "Aesthetic Experience as Metacognitive Feeling? A Dual-Aspect View."
[24] The paradox of the sublime might also be thought to be a near relative of the paradox of horror and the paradox of tragedy, where we are drawn to feelings related to horrific or tragic fictional events.

[25] See chapter five in Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*.
[26] Clewis, "What's the Big Idea? On Emily Brady's Sublime," 108.
[27] *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, xxix.
[28] Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, 814.
[29] Bataille, "Critical Dictionary," 483.
[30] Hesse's aesthetic contextualism coincidentally follows the kind of resistance to austere formalism and is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir's call for subjective contextualism in the creation of art, in part II of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Nemser, "Eva Hesse Interview with Cindy Nemser." de Beauvoir, *Pour Une Morale de l'Ambiguïté*.
[31] Dokic, "Aesthetic Experience as Metacognitive Feeling? A Dual-Aspect View," 5, 9.
[32] For the purposes of my argument, I will not engage the controversy concerning Serra's work here. For more on this see: Michael Brenson (April 2, 1989). "ART VIEW: The Messy Saga of 'Tilted Arc' Is Far From Over". *The New York Times*.
[33] Schjeldahl, "Richard Serra Will Jolt You Awake."
[34] Mccaughey, "Industrial Sublime."
[35] Dokic, "Aesthetic Experience as Metacognitive Feeling? A Dual-Aspect View," 10.
[36] Formalism was a primary concern of artists and critics of the late 19th and early 20th C. and resisted the idea that artworks necessarily represented reality, preferring to concentrate on the intrinsic properties of materials and form. Richard Serra is an example of an American sculptor who emerged from what Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried considered the evolution of formalism from the Impressionists onwards, a gradual withdrawal from the task of representing reality. See Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried entries in *Art in Theory* and this interview with Richard Serra https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2257kBHggs
[37] Admittedly, Dokic does not use 'sublime' in his text, so he might refute my claims, but this has no bearing on the overall argument I wish to present, which is that the natural or environmental sublime offers the extra dimension of formlessness that differs from the 'anti-form' or 'informe' or Bataille's version of formlessness.
[38] Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 75.
[39] See chapter 5 in Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*.
[40] Danto, "Beauty and Sublimity"; Newman, "The Sublime Is Now."
[41] For a more comprehensive list of artworks considered to be sublime, see Brady chapter 5. For cognitive limits on experiencing the sublime in music, see Jérome Dokic "Pluralisme Esthétique et Expériences Limites" : https://sublimae.wordpress.com/2020/01/27/jerome-dokic-ehess-ijn-on-pluralisme-esthetique-et-experiences-limites-27-01/
[42] Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," 133.
[43] Danto, "The American Sublime."
[44] Danto.
[45] Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind."
[46] Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology."
[47] Kant, I, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 172–92; Shabel, "The Transcendental Aesthetic."
[48] Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 42.
[49] Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," 132.
[50] The same installation was placed at City Hall Square in Copenhagen in October 2014 and both outside Bloomberg's European Headquarters and the Tate Gallery in London in December 2018.
[51] Zarin, "The Artist Who Is Bringing Icebergs to Paris."
[52] Jonze, "Icebergs Ahead! Olafur Eliasson Brings the Frozen Fjord to Britain."
[53] Jonze.
[54] Hepburn, "Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination," 191.
[55] Dokic, "Aesthetic Experience as Metacognitive Feeling? A Dual-Aspect View," 9; Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 45.
[56] Berleant, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," 236.

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