

Virtue Appreciation and Sustainability

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Abstract

What can we learn from Olafur Eliasson's 'Ice Watch' regarding the development of a sustainable attitude towards the environment? How and what might we learn from it to consider and rethink the relationship between aesthetic value, ethical value, and the concept of sustainability? 'Ice Watch' was a series of installations that took place in Copenhagen (2014), Paris (2015), and at Tate Modern in London (2018). Against an urban backdrop, each installation was of twelve massive, bluishly transparent iceberg chunks from Greenland, filled with bubbles of trapped air from millennia ago, and of which the public could have situated, multi-sensorial experiences, and eventually see it melting, disappearing, over time. This paper is a case study of Eliasson's Paris installation in particular, which coincided with the Climate Change COP-21 conference at the United Nations in 2015, and whose message was poignantly felt as a reminder of global warming, the melting polar regions, and the current environmental crisis. The paper is divided into three parts. The first provides a description of Eliasson's work, its intellectual and urban context. The second argues that Eliasson's work requires relational perceptual-intellectual double awareness. That awareness involves virtuous appreciation that is both externally directed and internally motivated. External direction entails relational engagement and the experience of aesthetic properties through the senses and proprioception; internal motivation here entails, in addition to scientific fact, the evolution of contemporary art and the role, if any, of aesthetic properties within it. It is argued that virtuous appreciation, judgment, and evaluation emerge if engaged for the right kinds of aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic reasons, even if one is left in deep sadness or discomfort regarding the work's creation. Part three presents objections according to which some epistemic reasons, such as artistic instrumentalism, and the artist's own actions (which are contrasted with 'Double Negative' by Michael Heizer, 1969 and 'Concrete Pour' by Robert Smithson, 1969), threaten to thwart the aesthetic and ethical aims of Eliasson's installation. Having responded to these objections, 'Ice Watch' is vindicated by combining perceptual, multi-sensual experience, and beauty with tragedy, grief, and guilt. These emotions are derived from intellectual, contextual, and epistemic concerns, as well as ethical worries, including those that arise from the artist's actions. I conclude the paper by answering the question, set out in the introduction, what and how can we learn from Eliasson's 'Ice Watch' to consider and rethink the relationship between aesthetic value, ethical value, and the concept of sustainability? I conclude that qualitative, aesthetic experience provides access to understanding nature's fragility, and our own fragility, when accompanied by the right kinds of internally motivated reasons, even in some instances of controversial artworks. This guides us to consider our everyday and critical engagements with both natural and urban environments, the repercussions of our actions, and the wider importance of cultural, artistic, and narrative-based approaches (in addition to the rigors of science) to virtuous appreciation, sustainability, and living a good life.