

Master of Arts in Communication & Culture

Project Paper

The Aesthetics of Participation

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In his Nobel lecture, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz identifies the persistent feature of our spiritual history as the consciousness of separation from the whole. Here he is referring specifically to Spanish American culture; however, he admits that the feeling of separation is universally felt.

It is born at the very moment of our birth: as we are wrenched from the Whole we fall into an alien land. This experience becomes a wound that never heals. It is the unfathomable depth of every man; all our ventures and exploits, all our acts and dreams, are bridges designed to overcome the separation and reunite us with the world and our fellow beings. Each man's life and the collective history of mankind can thus be seen as attempts to reconstruct the original situation. (Paz, 1990)

The life of the individual is then spent in work, as the need to cultivate a new garden of beauty, vitality, rhythm, dynamism and transformation becomes necessary in order to combat the threat of a wasteland. Paz later confirms that the pre-lapsarian condition of his own childhood centered around a literal and figurative garden, "The garden soon became the centre of my world...There was a fig tree, temple of vegetation, four pine trees, three ash trees, a nightshade, a pomegranate tree, wild grass and prickly plants that produced purple grazes. Time was elastic; space was a spinning wheel." (Paz, 1990) In Paz's garden existence, the rigid determinations of space and time had not yet hardened and existence had not yet been divided. The garden existence is one that is imagined to be experienced as pure presence, one in which one's felt relation to the world of nature is palpable. I think this is somehow suggested in Paz's loving recall of the quasi-mythic vegetation that animated his garden.

If I were to trace the genealogy of this project back to its source I'm certain that it would run deep into my childhood, when the simple lay of the surrounding landscape was enough to enthrall my senses and the enchantment and mystery of a place was beyond doubt. The gradual diminishment of the capacity to wonder at the vitality of life seems to be an inevitable pattern that each individual must live out. Our senses seem to lose their acuity, or perhaps it is the imagination that atrophies, as landscapes that once whispered gradually fall silent, and the delight of form gives way to a calculation of utility. Only the poets keep their awareness guarded, listening in on the primordial depth that they hear, and even they have to strain for a clear perception. We no longer pay heed to nature's call, and so nature becomes invisible and silent to us. Each individual, it seems, must be expelled from the Garden of Eden.

In this paper I would like to articulate a mode of perceptual participation, primarily an aesthetic mode, whereby humans enter into relation with the natural world around them. In order to elaborate on the mode of this participation I will draw examples from artists and thinkers that I believe have determined to make the notion of 'participation' an integral part of their work. The purpose of this paper is to situate my project in a larger tradition and theoretical framework. Over the last two years of study I have been drawn to a number of artists and thinkers who have influenced me a great deal. The common feature among them, or the relevant feature to me, has been the theme of the interaction between the self and the world, the organism and the environment, to use John Dewey's terminology, and how this interaction speaks of humanity's carnal and perceptual inherence in the world. Among these artists are Charles Olson, Jack Chambers

and Stan Brakhage, and I would like to discuss their work in relation to this interactive process of self and world.

Perhaps one of the consequences of the 'fallen' state results in a failure of perception, a type of blindness or inability to see. Perhaps the inherited structure of vision that informs our way of being obscures the truth of our habitual participation in it, and so we not only look at the world with a vision of detachment and distance but also feel this separation through embodied emotion. I want to suggest, then, the possibility of an aesthetic awareness that seeks to transform perception - an ecological perception, a vision of the garden, which many artists and thinkers that I love have suggested. I take it to be that in order to foster the requisite sensitivity necessary for a harmonious relationship with nature, in order to be a gardener, one needs to cultivate a certain perceptual grace, an art of seeing.

Our inability to pay attention to the natural splendor of our surroundings is, I believe, a major reason why we are rapidly turning our world into a commodity-ridden wasteland. As Robert Harrison has suggested, "nothing is less cultivated these days in Western societies than the art of seeing." (Harrison, 2008, p. 114) For most, the very possibility of cultivating an art of vision seems counter-intuitive, since vision is assumed to be a primarily non-volitional act. To awaken to the realization that vision is a shifting, malleable faculty imparts the knowledge that human vision is historically determined and dependent upon the concrete features of our existence. Our mode of vision, informed by a historical logic of detached observation and objectification, is one that is currently manifesting a disappearance of the non-human, natural world. With our attention consumed by a solipsistic world of our own making, the more-than-human world of

nature is becoming increasingly invisible. We are finding it more difficult to enter into any kind of meaningful relation with the natural world other than as a commodity or as a resource. “We live in an age,” Harrison asserts, “whose dominant perceptual framework makes it increasingly difficult to see what is right in front of us, leaving a great portion of the visible world out of the picture, as it were, even as it draws the eye to a plethora of pulsing images.” (Harrison, 2008, p.116) It seems contradictory to suggest that a human construct, namely a work of art, can possibly help in drawing our attention back to the visible world of earthly phenomena, but I believe that in order for nature’s plenitude to register with us we need an awakening of the senses, and I believe that art is able to catalyze the latent intensity of our ordinary sensorial experiences and affect this awakening.

Dewey’s Aesthetics

John Dewey is known primarily for his pragmatism and philosophy of education rather than his aesthetics. I believe that his aesthetics represent one of the most fully realized and profound aesthetic philosophies to emerge from America, and I believe that his influence is enormous but often unacknowledged. As I will argue, I think Dewey’s influence is apparent in some of the great North American artists, including Charles Olson and Jack Chambers; artists who have influenced me a great deal.

Dewey’s aesthetic ideas are primarily contained within a single volume, *Art as Experience*, which was first delivered as a series of lectures given at Harvard in 1932. This volume is often viewed as a tangential late work within his corpus, and so the extent to which aesthetics figured within his philosophical system is often ignored. Rather than treating aesthetics as a type of digression from the more important matters of metaphysics

or epistemology, Dewey asserts that it is the aesthetic that is the cornerstone from which to judge the soundness of a philosophical system, “To esthetic experience, then, the philosopher must go to understand what experience is...There is no test that so surely reveals the one-sidedness of a philosophy as its treatment of art and esthetic experience.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 274) Why should the aesthetic hold such significance? It is because the aesthetic experience affects a transformation and brings to awareness the pre-conscious and fundamental unity of the self and the world, or what Dewey terms, the organism and the environment. The aesthetic experience renders ‘visible’ what is otherwise taken for granted, which is that human beings are integrated or embedded within an environment that they interact with and that this interaction is pre-conscious and pre-reflective, “The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 13) *Art as Experience* begins by emphasizing the primacy of the interactive nature of experience. Dewey refers variously to the self that is in interactive participation with the environment as the *organism*, the *live creature*, the *savage*, and most revealing, the *being fully alive*. All of these terms connote a mode of being that is vitally tuned to its surroundings, alive to the rhythmic interplay of its senses and the environmental field around it, “There is much in the life of the savage that is sodden. But, when the savage is most alive, he is most observant of the world about him and most taut with energy. As he watches what stirs about him, he, too, is stirred.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 19) The aesthetic experience is for Dewey a kind of ontological experience, a form of experience that precedes the world of ideas and logic and underlies our intellectual, conceptual and conscious grasp of the world. The aesthetic experience in a sense reveals what is always present but invisible,

the fact of our carnal and perceptual inherence in the world and the fund of implicit meanings that are stored in that inherence. What is always present but invisible for Dewey are *habits*, and it is important to understand what Dewey means by this.

Habits, for Dewey, are the forms that establish our being-in-the-world, the world founding patterns that structure experience. For Dewey, all experience is constituted by contextual habits that inform the scope of meaning, cognition, perception and action. In a sense, habits make up the substratum of experience, the underlying grid or foundation upon which experience surfaces. Habits function invisibly and silently, providing a context or horizon of acquired meanings that allows the organism to maintain equilibrium with the environment, to make sense of the world. Every distinct cultural group, considered both geographically and historically, would have its own set of habits. Formed habits become embodied in the organism, structuring both perception and meaning, and they determine the way in which the organism interacts with the environment. Dewey states,

The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to *ways* or modes of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions, these express a way of behaving. Habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts. (Dewey, 1930, p. 42)

It is because the organism has habits that he is able to reconstruct an environmental field at all. Habits are not unlike what Robert Harrison referred to when speaking of dominant perceptual frameworks, only for Dewey, habits include perception and structure the whole field of our experience. As Victor Kestenbaum has noted in his study of Dewey's

phenomenological sense, Dewey's concept of habit bears much resemblance to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the habitual body. Consider how similar Merleau-Ponty's description of the habitual body's 'inner diaphragm' is to Dewey's notion of intentional habit,

Prior to stimuli and sensory contents, we must recognize a kind of inner diaphragm which determines, infinitely more than they do, what our reflexes and perceptions will be able to aim at in the world, the area of our possible operations, the scope of our life. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 79)

Both of these notions provide ways of conceptualizing a pre-objective field that inheres in all human endeavors. Dewey's notion of habit is basically a synthesis of similar concepts from two of his predecessors, William James and Charles Peirce. James emphasized the concept of habit from a biological perspective, and Peirce from a cultural perspective. For both, and for Dewey as well, habits are somewhat paradoxical in that they provide both the rigid boundaries for action and the context by which to transcend those boundaries. Dewey explains this characteristic of habit most clearly. He claims that, on the one hand, habits are inertial forces that are difficult to break from. This characteristic of habit is perhaps most familiar to us in ordinary parlance. A bad habit is a repetitive behaviour that we seem to constantly re-enact. For Dewey, old habitual patterns run deep into the hearts and minds of men. Our habitual modes of behaviour are drawn from whole fields of being, ways of seeing and patterned conditions that are embedded in our biology but also in the institutional structures that regulate culture. For Dewey, these habituations are incredibly difficult to break from, "Ways of observing, of communicating, of prizing and disapproving are engrained in character and are neither

thrown off nor greatly modified by what are deemed revolutions by those who record the course of history.” (Dewey, 1938, p.4)

At their worse, habits can become so rigid and automatic so as to completely deaden perception. When variation and dynamism are no longer able to throw off or check the inertia of habit, then routine habits take over and the aesthetic is altogether absent, “The enemies of the esthetic are neither practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 40) This is the negative aspect of habit, the aspect of habit that dulls our capacity to think and feel in new ways and which closes us off from other forms of knowing.

Habits, while being under constant threat of stultification and routine, are also the means by which we establish stable experiences and the means by which we can expand the whole field of experience. When resistance or disturbances challenge routine habits then it becomes possible to form new habits. Dewey’s primary concern was with the transformation of our habits, and he felt that the aesthetic experience was the primary and perhaps only transformative agent. The aesthetic experience could intensify our habitual mode of being, and could thereby intensify and shatter “old, deep-seated habits or engrained organic ‘memories’; yet these old habits are deployed in new ways, ways in which they are adapted to a more completely integrated world so that they themselves achieve a new integration. Hence the liberating, expansive power of art.” (Dewey, 1931, p. 121). The aesthetic experience is able to illuminate our engrained habits and create possibilities for expanding, breaking and revolutionizing old patterns of experience.

Because art is able to communicate the transformative energy of the aesthetic experience, it is able to educate the organs of perception and widen one's vision.

The need for a transformation of our habitual ways of seeing and perceiving has never been more urgent. We are seldom truly aware of our participation in the matrix of earthly life. We have little sense that we are animatedly connected to the world outside our skins, and instead feel as Paz has described it 'wrenched from the Whole.' The ultimate concern for Dewey was to transform one's habitual mode of being so as to overcome the traditional dualisms that have plagued Western consciousness. In the aesthetic experience, oppositions between mind and body, matter and spirit, self and world, are annulled. The ecologist David Abram has likewise written about the urgent need for re-establishing a connection with the more-than-human world by transforming our mode of perceiving. In a passage describing an encounter with cave spiders while in Indonesia, he describes what Dewey would undoubtedly call an aesthetic experience,

It was from them that I first learned of the intelligence that lurks in nonhuman nature, the ability that an alien form of sentience has to echo one's own, to instill a reverberation in oneself that temporarily shatters habitual ways of seeing and feeling, leaving one open to a world all alive, awake and aware. It was from such small beings that my senses first learned of the countless worlds within worlds that spin in the depths of this world that we commonly inhabit, and from them that I learned that my body could, with practice, enter sensorially into these dimensions. (Abram, 1997, p. 19)

For Abram, this was a transformative aesthetic experience. What characterized the change that took place? A shattering of old habits, a new sudden awareness of the

complexity, beauty and vitality of the surrounding world, the sensuous participation of the body in the perceived phenomena, and the intimation of some deep echo, reverberation or primordial rhythm; all of these characterizations are in striking accord with Dewey's account of the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience develops out of the dynamic interaction between the live creature and its environment, "Instead of signifying being shut up within one's private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events." (Dewey, 1934, p.19) The act of identification with objects and events implies that the egoic self, the transcendental ego that Western man has placed between himself and the world of nature, has fled. This emptying of the self is characteristic of aesthetic perception and is the precondition for the unity that characterizes the experience.

For Dewey, the artwork could function as a working catalyst for the aesthetic experience. This was its real function. For centuries art had been locked in an Aristotelian aesthetic with an emphasis on "making to the total exclusion of doing", which had imbued the completed art product with a kind of authority and universal form. (Buettner, 1975, p. 384) In this conception, greater emphasis is placed on the object itself, rather than active process by which the object came to be and which is re-enacted in the viewer or perceiver. Dewey's ambition, stated early in *Art as Experience*, is to purge art of this iconic function by rejecting the absolute value of the art as an object or product and emphasizing instead the *experience* of art, the actual *work* of art. The aura that glorifies fine art and keeps it locked in museums serves only to stultify the dynamism that characterizes the *work* of art. Dewey seeks to abolish this glorification which separates

art from life: “This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 3) Works of art, according to Dewey, are intensified experiences that are continuous with our experiences of normal living.

The conception that a work of art is somehow radically distinct from everyday processes of living illuminates just how impoverished and stunted the experience of everyday life is for modern man. Dewey notes that the modern economic system has collapsed the art object into the stream of commodities, being produced as other objects in the market and furthering the severance between art and life. Art is rendered meaningless when it is separated from the conditions which give rise to it. The compartmentalization of art that occurs in the museum, for example, means that it is divorced from performing an integral task within the ordinary, daily life of the community. Dewey suggests that the conditions that have set art upon a remote pedestal are somewhat unique to our times, as the function of art in pre-modern cultures was inseparable from the rhythms of everyday life:

Dancing and pantomime, the sources of the art of the theater, flourished as part of religious rites and celebrations. Musical art abounded in the fingering of the stretched string, the beating of the taut skin, the blowing with reeds. Even in the caves, human habitations were adorned with colored pictures that kept alive to the senses experiences with the animals that were so closely bound with the lives of humans...They were part of the significant life of an organized community. (Dewey, 1934, p. 7)

The significance of art lies in its ability to punctuate and intensify the rhythms of the normal life of the community. Separated from this, there can be no significant *work* of art, no *experience*.

Dewey believes that art has been severed from life and that this separation is evidence of a general impoverishment of experience and deadening of the energies of life. Dewey recognizes that this deadening of experience arose, at least in part, from the increasing abstraction of man's embodied nature and the pitting of matter against soul,

Why is the attempt to connect the higher and ideal things of experience with basic vital roots so often regarded as betrayal of their nature and denial of their value? A complete answer to the question would involve the writing of a history of morals that would set forth the conditions that have brought about contempt for the body, fear of the senses, and the opposition of flesh to spirit. (Dewey, 1934, p. 20)

To the being fully alive there is no division between one's body and the nature of experience. The being fully alive accepts that his flesh and his spirit are united in experience and that any derogation of the senses is a derogation of experience. Accordingly, a heightened experience is only ever heightened awareness of the vital energies of being a creature, an animal in and of the world. The separation between organism and environment, flesh and spirit, self and world, subject and object, is a bifurcation that Dewey sees as a deleterious force on experience. The enforced contradistinction of the higher, finer and ideal forms of experience with the base, vital, and lowly forms of experience, which is to say, embodied experiences, is a division that art can work to overcome. Dewey evidences an affinity for art as a kind of return to

primitive and perhaps unitive experience, to a way of being that restores to man his creaturely experience, fully connected to the rhythms of the world. To my mind, this ambition, to transform routine habits of perceiving and to realize the participatory nature of experience, has been a major concern for three major North American artists: Charles Olson, Jack Chambers and Stan Brakhage. I would like to elaborate on Dewey's aesthetics by drawing out some of the marked similarities between him and Olson and Chambers. Following that, I would like to comment on the participatory nature of Brakhage's aesthetics.

Charles Olson

The poetry and criticism of Charles Olson have exerted an immeasurable force on American aesthetics. As rector of the experimental Black Mountain College, Olson's poetics have directly influenced a vast number of poets, artists and aestheticians. The breadth and complexity of his aesthetics is representative of a cosmology, a radical way of perceiving and being in the world, one that shares much in common with the philosophy of John Dewey.

Olson's open form poetics express a concern with process and activity rather than finality and product. The stress, in Olson's poetics, is on the work accomplished by the poem, the energy exerted by the poem. Olson's style of open form poetics arose out of an opposition to non-projective 'closed verse', which, in Olson's formulation, is strikingly similar to the deadened museum art-object that Dewey criticizes. By 'closed verse' Olson is referring to the deleterious "emphasis on the result, the text of the page, the finished product, the art object." (Waldrop, 1977, p.468) Closed forms of verse that adhere to rigid structures restrict the dynamic interaction between art and ordinary life. For Olson,

the 'closed verse' poem amounted to a deadening of perception and a halting of the free flow of energies that art can put into form and thereby project outward. Olson's project, like that of Dewey, is to restore the active principle in the work of art and make it an active agent of change and transformation in ordinary experience. For him, it was the chief aim of art to enact and transfer the energies of experience.

What Dewey saw as the unique capacity of art was its ability to intensify and punctuate experience so as to induce an aesthetic experience in the perceiver. But to achieve this transference of experience means that the artwork must not merely re-present the experience undergone, instead the artist must organize the energies of the experience so as to be expressive of the experience rather than imitative or slavishly representative. This is in striking accord with the poetic theories of Olson. Olson's concept of *projective verse* proposes a method for poetic creation that he called "composition by *field*." In this concept, the poem is configured as "energy transferred from where the poet got it, by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader." (Olson, p. 16) The poem must not merely describe the energy of experience, nor should it be a representation of this energy, rather it must itself be an energy-construct and it must *project* this energy. Olson's intent is to have his readers undergo an experience of the energy that he originally underwent. Dewey's aesthetics also stress the experience *undergone* by virtue of the art object, not the art object itself. What is important in Dewey's aesthetics is the process undergone by the perceiver of the art object, as well as the process undergone by the artist which gave rise to the art object. Dewey and Olson both view art as an extension of the energy of experience, an energy discharge that "unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an

experience.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 48) The artist, then, is the one who is sensitive enough to perceive the energies of experience and able to extend that same energy in artistic form.

For Olson, the qualities of the energy that make up experience are akin to flux, impermanence, process and change. At bottom of all experience, then, is rhythm, encapsulated neatly in Olson’s lines, “Of rhythm is image, of image is knowing, of knowing there is a construct.” The anchor of all of Olson’s poetics is rhythm, as well as being at the center of his sense of experience itself, “There is only one thing you can do about the kinetic, re-enact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe. And why art is the only twin life has – its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact.” (Olson, 1961, p. 61) Art has to enact and project the very rhythms of experience. For Olson, the site from which the energies of experience arise is the *field*. The *field* is a site of free moving energy, a dynamic space “wherein bodies and movements might appear as different aspectual descriptions of a single, continuous topography of change.” (Miller, 2003, p. 182) Olson’s concept of the *field* is a concept that is directly relevant to Dewey. Dewey’s notion of interaction between organism and environment is conceived of as an event. According to Dewey “wherever there is an event, there is interaction, and interaction entails the conception of a field.” (Dewey, 1931, p. 198)

In *Projective Verse*, Olson lays out a principal law of composition by *field*: “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.” (Olson, p. 17) The poem takes the form of an energy-construct in order to extend, rather than exist referentially to, the content of the *field*. The poet is therefore in a dialog with the environment and the poem can be seen as a circuit of energy completing a flow that arises

from the *field*, of which the poet is part of, and in a sense returns to. The poet's purpose must not be to transmute the ego for projection. The poet's purpose must be seen as being in participation with the larger field of Being, as a fusing of 'I' and 'Other'. This is a very peculiar stance towards reality and art that stands quite apart from the Platonic tradition of ideal, stable forms. A very similar aesthetic viewpoint is found in Dewey. The dynamic interaction of organism and environment, which Dewey sees as foundational to aesthetic experience, is also characterized primarily by rhythm,

Interaction of environment with organism is the source, direct or indirect, of all experience and from the environment come those checks, resistances, furtherances, equilibria, which, when they meet with the energies of the organism in appropriate ways, constitute form. The first characteristic of the environing world that makes possible the existence of artistic form is rhythm. There is rhythm in nature before poetry, painting, architecture and music exist. (Dewey, 1934, p. 147)

Our most primal experiences are of interaction with the environment, from which arrive our experiences of push/pull, tension, conflict, resistance, and it is these resistances that create rhythm, the root substance (if it can be called that) of all experience. These primal, embodied experiences of conflict and disruption are the aesthetic experience in germ.

Olson and Dewey share the belief that bringing awareness to this form of experience, opening oneself to these energies, is necessary for overcoming the bifurcation of nature and experience. We retract from this effort, perhaps out of fear of letting go of the ego. The projective act, as Olson tells us, requires us to move beyond and outside of our egoic selves in order to participate in "dimensions larger than the man." (Olson, 1961

p. 60) Our fear in venturing towards contact with the larger field of being is an aspect of the aesthetic experience that Dewey also notes, “The esthetic experience is receptive. It involves surrender. Adequate yielding of the self is possibly only through a controlled activity that may well be intense. In much of our intercourse with our surroundings we withdraw; sometimes from fear... Perception is an act of going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 53) In order to participate in the larger *field* of being, wherein the energies of existence become sensible, one must open oneself up, one must cultivate an attitude of surrender.

An aesthetic experience is necessarily a consummatory experience, that is, in order to be an aesthetic experience it must come to a point of fulfillment or temporary equilibrium. It is this wholeness, this coming to consummation, which art is able to intensify, “A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. This fact, I think, is the explanation of that feeling of exquisite intelligibility and clarity we have in the presence of an object that is experienced with esthetic intensity.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 195) Dewey stresses that the integral experience must move towards closure and finally come to completion. One must acknowledge a seeming contradiction here in Dewey’s own aesthetic system. As stated earlier, much of Dewey’s efforts are aimed at purging art of its iconic status as a product or object. His philosophy seeks to dissolve the stability accorded to the art product and place the emphasis on the dynamic work of art, and yet he suggests here that an art object must elicit the quality of being a whole. For Dewey, the art product is deadened when it is taken as merely a product; complete unto itself, requiring no work and catalyzing no active experience in the viewer. When the art

object is experienced aesthetically, however, then it becomes active and dynamic. Dewey recognizes that the art product is by necessity a coherent physical product, however, it is also potentially much more than that, and it is the quality that Dewey seeks to emphasize.

When the structure of the object is such that its force interacts happily (but not easily) with the energies that issue from the experience itself; when their mutual affinities and antagonisms work together to bring about a substance that develops cumulatively and surely (but not steadily) toward a fulfilling of impulses and tensions, the indeed there is a work of art. (Dewey, 1934, p. 162)

The art object creates a movement, a dynamic exchange of tensions that the viewer participates in. The art object is experienced as a building up of these tensions and ultimately as a fulfillment of these tensions. The difference between this conception of the art product and the deadened art product that Dewey criticizes is that the latter does not actively engage the viewer at all. There is no experience of tension, rhythm or movement in the deadened art object. Instead the object is seen as complete unto itself, requiring no engagement and no work. In the active art object, however, tensions are built up and resolved, just as a musical phrase builds up tensions and resistances only to then fulfill these checks.

It is tempting to draw a distinction between Dewey and Olson's aesthetics here. Olson's aesthetics stress open-ended, disruptive and continual process. Looking closer, however, one finds that Dewey's qualification for wholeness is in remarkable accord with Olson. It is clear that Dewey takes many of his cues from Romantic notions of organic unity (Coleridge, Wordsworth and Keats feature prominently in *Art as Experience*). The

Romantics, though emphasizing growth, nonetheless sought for a faultless ideal in organic unity. (Granger, p. 54) In this respect Dewey departs from the Romantic ideal. While he does stress that aesthetic experience must draw towards a consummatory close, he does not suggest that this closure is somehow absolute. Instead, Dewey suggests that the consummatory experience is not closed off from the ebb and flow of experience. It does not attain to some higher unity that is somehow outside the flow of experience. It is, rather, a short attainment of equilibrium that is also “the initiation of a new relation to the environment, one that brings with it potency of new adjustments to be made through struggle. The time of consummation is also one of *beginning anew*.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 17) For Dewey, the fulfilled experience only exists in the context of *passage* from disturbance to harmony, “The live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his surroundings.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 17) There is no final resting place in Dewey’s aesthetics. Instead, the consummated experience only gives opening to new opportunities for other experiences to be had. As David Granger succinctly puts it, “Aesthetic experience with Dewey culminates in...a move toward an ever-expanding horizon of meaning and value...There is no higher reality to be unmasked; there is only the body and mind working together in and through the natural and social environment to create and recreate meaning.” (Granger, 2003, p. 57) The spatial orientations of Dewey’s aesthetics are distinctively horizontal; the aesthetic experience is not transcendence to some higher, more pure or ideal realm. It is only a momentary harmony reached as the organism interacts with its surroundings before branching out again, forward to some disturbance and back to harmony eventually. This spatial characterization seems fitting for Olson as well. Olson’s aesthetics rely heavily on notions of spatial interaction and

geography, “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.” (Olson, p. 2) In letter 26 of the Maximus Poems, Olson writes:

I have this sense,
 that I am one
 with my skin
 Plus this – plus this:
 that forever the geography
 which leans in
 on me I compell
 backwards I compell Gloucester
 to yield, to
 change

The geography is *forever* leaning in on the body. The geography, the field, *touches* the body. The body appropriates these energies. The poem organizes the energies of this touching and returns it to the field, which furthers the possibility for other, new interactions. It is an ongoing, endless, open-ended process of continual growth. The only stability is the continuity of the process itself; there is no final resting place. One of Olson’s qualifiers for projective verse is that “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION.” (Olson, 1950, p. 17) A perception is established but then moves on as quickly as it arose. Dewey, several years before Olson formulated projective verse, had the insight that “The real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while *moving*

with constant change in its development.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 51) Continual rhythmic interchange within spatial environments – this, for both Dewey and Olson, is the nature of experience and it is the artist’s unique ability to be more aware of this powerful process so as to extend its affectivity to others.

It is worth noting that in addition to sharing similar spatial conceptions, both Dewey and Olson seem to be of the same mind regarding the experience of time. To share in the secrets of objects, one must devote their complete attention to the present moment. This is not to ignore one’s past, which looms over the present, nor to deny anticipations of the future, but it is to understand that these temporal abstractions only ever exist in the present moment. Sensitivity and openness to the present moment characterize the projective act. This is why Olson stressed attention to the immediate particular, for the present is made up of immediate particulars that are often obscured by mental abstractions formed in the past. Similarly, the aesthetic experience, according to Dewey, involves an intensification of the present, “Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive. Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moment in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what is now.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 18) The being fully alive is attentive to the qualities of the present moment. He is not lost in mental abstractions, but rather is acutely aware of the vividness of the moment as it impresses itself upon his senses.

Olson’s poetics are vast and so rich in influence that they can be approached from many perspectives. In several interesting ways, however, the connections between Dewey and Olson seem rather direct, though Dewey is rarely mentioned in conjunction with

Olson. The similarities between the aesthetic frameworks of John Dewey and Charles Olson are numerous. Suffice it to say that they are both very American in their aesthetic perspectives, especially in how they conceive of man's interaction with his geography. Perhaps Dewey's influence reached Olson in an organic fashion from his time at Black Mountain College, which derived its impetus from the philosophy of education first articulated by Dewey. In any case, both have left the artist with profound tools with which to shape and transform the quality of experience.

Jack Chambers

Traditionally, in the Western intellectual tradition, perception and sensation are thought of as passive and *merely* receptive. The conventional position regarding sensation is that the senses do not transform what they perceive; they merely receive information that the intellect then orders and establishes meaningful relations with. For Dewey, this is not the case. Perception is an active, creative and intentional habit whereby meanings are inherent in the act of perception itself. The traditional notion of sensation is such that what is sensible is essentially inert or inactive. It is the sentient being, the self that activates and animates the sensible. Dewey turns this process on its head, giving credence to the notion that perception does not come solely from the individual, but from an interaction between the sentient and sensible, a communication of self and world. In this configuration, the sensible is equally responsible for awakening perception as the sentient or self, and so objects, places and the whole environment is in some sense alive and active. Phenomena have the ability to call out to us. Modern consciousness has for the most part lost the ability to hear the call and feel the interaction. We do not look upon a landscape, a tree, a passing cloud, or a spider and sense the reciprocal, interactive dialog

that it is having with us. The mysterious Otherness of nature is silenced and we seem unable to share in the secrets that objects share.

Over the course of many years, primarily from 1968 to the mid 1970s, the Canadian artist Jack Chambers was carefully articulating and reformulating his aesthetic viewpoint. Earlier articulations of this aesthetic he called *Perceptual Realism*, however, in its final manifestation he termed it *Perceptualism*. As the titles of these credos suggest, perception is the primary consideration informing them. Chambers sees the perceptual process as one that is capable of diminishing the divide between the world and the self. Vision or perception is seen essentially and ideally as a unitive faculty.

For Chambers, perception is a mysterious and creative process. The vision of reality, the world, is not constructed solely from our subjective experiences. Nor is perception merely a passive intake, scanning or apprehension of the outside world. Rather perception is a mysterious and above all creative process that consists of a type of dialog between the world and the self, arising from the limen, the threshold of the subjective and objective,

The *perception* of the natural world...is a source of truth about oneself, because not only what one projects but also what he receives is himself...Perception is the intelligible brilliance within us, when our soul and the soul of things become present to one another. It is the intuitive unfolding of both the *self* and the *other* in one embrace (Chambers, 1978, p. 165).

The perception of the world comes from a commingling of the *other*, or the world at large, and the *self*. Chambers has referred to this dialogic perception as being like a flow whereby the exterior world moves into the self, which then translates the sensory

impressions and flows outward to the world again to structure experience. The self, then, through perception, is thoroughly permeable and exists in reciprocal connectivity with the world outside of it.

Whether or not Chambers was familiar with Dewey's aesthetics is unclear, however, I think this account of perception is thoroughly Deweyan. At the heart of Dewey's aesthetics is the notion of interaction between the organism and the environment. As he says, it is "only by progressive organization of 'inner' and 'outer' material in organic connection with each other can anything be produced that is not a learned document or an illustration of something familiar." (Dewey, 1934, p. 75) Remember that for Dewey aesthetic perception was a powerful source of new experiences because it could shatter habitual modes of awareness. Like Dewey, Chambers seems to be concerned with the expansive and revelatory aspects of perception, as he refers to perception as a potential source of truth about oneself. Chambers' notion of perception is also about dialog between organism and environment. Even the language and specific terms which he used to articulate his own aesthetics seem to borrow much from the language that Dewey used in constructing his philosophy, "Perception is a sensory communication that occurs at a primary level between organisms: through the skin to the core and back through the skin again into the exterior world." (Chambers, 2002, p. 34)

Dewey and Chambers both share a Romantic background and both think of art in terms of organic growth. For both, art is a natural activity of the organism, perhaps the most natural activity that the organism can perform because it reenacts and communicates the process of experience itself. Chambers has stated that art is "a craft of the natural, like

fruit growing on a tree is a craft of nature. Man as art is the image of nature just as mankind is the fruit of the primary process animating the earth and all in which the earth as a fruit is rooted.” The organic connection between art making and the very process of living is made explicit in Chambers aesthetics. He continues, “Man as an artist can communicate that in nature to other men because men and nature share the same instinct.” (Chambers, 1972, p. 29) Art arises out of the soil, so to speak, a sentiment shared by Dewey. For both, art grows organically out of the conditions that root man biologically in the earth. This is why for Dewey art is “prefigured in the very process of living. A bird builds its nest and a beaver its dam when internal organic pressures cooperate with external materials so that the former are fulfilled and the latter are transformed in a satisfying culmination.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 24). Like the processes by which all other biological life maintain and create equilibrium with the environment, so art is a craft of the natural and shaping of experience so as to bridge the divisions between the organism and its environment. Art is an intentional imitation of the process by which the senses perceive the external world. If an artwork is able to reenact the process of perception in the viewer than it has communicated the mysterious process of perception itself - it has revealed the strangeness of the familiar.

As has been stressed above, within Dewey’s aesthetics, the important aspect of art is the *work* of art as opposed to the final product or object. The art object must reenact the dynamic *work* of perception. By stressing the work of the art object, rather than its finality as a construct, Dewey also changes the conventional role of the beholder of an artwork from mere receiver to active participant. We might think that normally a viewer of an artwork stands in front of an object waiting for it to reveal its meaning. For Dewey,

the viewer of an artwork is not so passive. Rather the beholder of an artwork has to undergo a process of interaction that is derivative of the artist's original interaction, which prompted him to create in the first place,

For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense...Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art...There is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist. The one who is too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention to perform this work will not see or hear. His "appreciation" will be a mixture of scraps of learning with conformity to norms of conventional admiration and with a confused, even if genuine, emotional excitation. (Dewey, p. 54)

There is a kind of extended organic resonance that ripples through the whole process of art. It begins primordially with the organism's interaction with its environment. The artist transforms the concrete materials within his existence in order to create an imitative response to the original interaction. The beholder must interact with the art object in order to have some sense of the original interaction. Here is a theory of art that asks the percipient of the artwork to be active, to meet the art object halfway in order to become a creator of meaning and perception. Dewey stresses that the percipient of the artwork is not supposed to necessarily undergo the same experience of the artist, but that comparable relations must be felt; participation with the object is absolutely necessary. In an interview with Ross Woodman, Jack Chambers stated a very similar position regarding the role of the viewer. Chambers stated that he did not wish for the viewer to

necessarily experience his own perceptions, but rather to pay attention to the perceptions that arise from the viewers own response to the work,

Most people tend to doubt the information and sources of their own perception.

They will think that in order to experience an object they have to concentrate on it alone and suppress the periphery things that are going on around it. They need to be reassured that the periphery is not a distraction, that their own subliminal sensations are right and should be made as conscious as possible. Painting shouldn't be dictating a particular response, but should be there as a pool of energy to set off reactions. If the painting works, you're more likely to trust your reactions and enjoy them. (Woodman, 1967, p. 13)

How often it is the case that a bewildered onlooker will respond to an artwork with "I don't get it." For Dewey, as well as for Chambers, there is nothing to necessarily get. Rather there is only the possibility for interaction, for the chance to build a perception and create meaning. This position does not deny that the artist does in fact embed meanings into the work, it only asserts that what is primary is not to decode the artwork as though it were a puzzle but rather to get a palpable sense of one's own reactions to it.

Both Chambers and Dewey understand that we do not apprehend reality in a primarily cognitive way, rather our primary mode of awareness is more primal or emotional, akin to 'feeling' or 'sensing' something. For Dewey, we lose our 'sense' of reality because our awareness of things becomes habitual. Aesthetic experience returns our senses to the unity of self and world in the perceptual act, and by so doing is able to do violence to rigid habits so as to enrich experience. I believe that Chambers view of perception is strikingly consistent with that of Dewey. Chambers has stated, "We already

know the mysterious, but our minds are not conscious of it. When we open onto the mysterious we do not do it consciously. But only by *doing* it do we perceive, and only by perceiving can we experience the wonder of familiar appearances.” (Chambers, 1972, p. 31) Like Dewey, Chambers believed that the sources of the mysterious, vitalizing forces of perception are already apart of experience. The interactive nature of perception, and its mysterious and creative capacities cannot be separated from experience; it is just that we are unconscious of them and lose a sense for how extraordinary the nature of the process is. What is more, Chambers, again like Dewey, finds that aesthetic experiences can be concealed within the most ordinary, familiar and concrete appearances. Chambers goes on to say that as we lose the ability to engage in aesthetic experiences then “the familiar becomes for us mundane as we age, and finally invisible.” (Chambers, 1972, p. 32) Chambers is basically describing what happens to experience as habits become rigid. When we lose our sense of wonder in the act of perceiving the world it is because our awareness has become rigidly habitual. The task, then, is to restore a sense of wonder to the world of appearances by becoming aware of the dynamism of perception.

By perceptual vision, Chambers is not referring to an imaginary, hallucinatory or dream-like state, but rather “that faculty of inner vision where the object appears in the splendour of its essential namelessness” (Chambers, 1978, p. 122). When we perceive the world categorically, we parse the world into discrete units that accord with linguistic structures. For Chambers, the experience of perception shatters these categories and exposes qualities within the world that violate linguistic constraints. Chambers illustrates this with an example:

When we observe nature disinterestedly, inevitably the question arises: what is it?

It's called a tree, I know, but what is it? This preliminary attitude of uncertainty opens the door to experience. The outward look which steps toward nature to find the door to beyond it I call *perceptualism*, because it has to do with seeing nature in this way: as a mysterious and unique expression of creative energy. (Chambers, 1972, p. 29)

Beyond our categorization of the world into linguistic structures and prior to cognition, there persists an apprehension of the world that opens us up to the mystery of experience. This type of apprehension, what Chambers means by *perception*, is not disclosed only in certain situations or places, rather, it is everywhere present and is revealed when one changes their mode of perceiving, their habits. Chambers makes a distinction here between the linguistic tree that can be categorized, and the 'perceptual' tree, which does not have a label and which cannot be categorized. John Dewey would call the act of labeling the tree with the word 'tree' an act of recognition. The other form of observation, which reveals that the tree is much more mysterious than the linguistic constraints put upon it, Dewey would call an act of perception. Dewey makes the distinction rather clear, "Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely. In recognition there is a beginning of an act of perception. But this beginning is not allowed to serve the development of a full perception of the thing recognized." (Dewey, 1934, p. 52) When something is 'recognized' then it has fallen into a previously formed category, and so loses any sense of mystery or wonder. The process of perception is halted and does not develop into an experience that might affect some transformation or vitalize one's awareness. As Dewey says, "Bare recognition is satisfied when a proper tag or

label is attached, “proper” signifying one that serves a purpose outside the act of recognition – as a salesman identifies wares by a sample. It involves no stir of the organism, no inner commotion.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 53) The inner commotion is characteristic of an act of perception. Perception is that faculty which can elicit a pervasive feeling in the organism and which can arouse a new experience. It is “the instant before consciousness; it precedes the conscious identification of objects.” (Chambers, 1972, p. 31) Both Chambers and Dewey identify perception as being a faculty that is beyond language, beyond categorization. Perception can bring us back to a more primordial form of awareness, one that is deeply attuned to the inherent unity of self and world. I believe that today we are mostly unaware of the unity of experience and instead experience it in a fragmentary manner.

Though Dewey and Chambers share many of the same attitudes regarding aesthetics, language and perception, they do, nevertheless, differ in other significant ways. The most significant difference between the two is in their attitudes towards the transcendent. Chambers’ art is one that arises from a deep reverence for being. His artworks testify to the persistent desire he had to render the world wondrous. Art, for him, was a vocation and he believed in its ability to communicate the process that animates the sensation of wonder - perception. For Chambers, however, perception puts us back into contact with an energy that is essentially of divine origin. Chambers’ claims about the nature of perception are based on a belief in a spiritual, transcendent or supernatural dimension of reality, and this is fundamentally different from Dewey’s account. Central to Chambers’ artistic endeavors was the effort to reveal a higher, transcendent reality, which he believed the experience of perception would disclose. In his statement on

perception, painting and the cinema, Chambers refers to this higher reality as the “Invisible Body ‘behind’ the world.” Chambers states, “The Invisible Body is energy and is a more vital reality than the material attenuation of it . . . our sensory world.” (Chambers, 1972, p. 32) The term “Invisible Body” is obviously a sacred or holy conception of a reality that transcends material reality. This reference to an “Invisible Body” transcendent to the world is consistent with many Christian thinkers, such as Teilhard de Chardin’s notion of a *divine milieu*, who conceive of a divine source that animates all of material reality. This is opposite to the view of Dewey, who seeks to account for the dynamic and vitalizing experience of perception in purely naturalistic terms. Dewey rejects the notion that there is a transcendent reality or divine source ‘behind’ material, sensuous reality. This is not to suggest that he disparages material reality or sees it as an entirely profane reality. Instead, for Dewey, sensuous reality is even more deserving of our reverence because it is the primary and indeed only reality there is. For Dewey, the experience of wonder in nature, the rapture of the aesthetic, the sense of the mystery of reality, need not be attributed a divine origin. All of these experiences can be made account of within the realm of the natural and are not deepened by a supernatural explanation.

It is of significance that Dewey does not disparage what many would call religious, mystical, or transcendent experiences. For him, the intensity of aesthetic perception can induce such religious feelings, however, Dewey maintains that though these feelings may elicit the sense of a transcendent reality, it is nonetheless a natural reality. In intense aesthetic experiences, as Dewey puts it, “We are, as it were, introduced into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in

which we live our ordinary experiences.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 195) Dewey comes very close to introducing the notion of a transcendent world beyond that of ordinary reality. He maintains, however, that such experiences are merely an intensification or deepening of ordinary, sensuous reality. “There is no limit,” he claims, “to the capacity of immediate sensuous experience to absorb into itself meanings and values that in an of themselves – that is in the abstract – would be designated ‘ideal’ and ‘spiritual.’” (Dewey, 1934, p. 29) While Chambers does in fact characterize the experience of perception as a kind of spiritual revelation, Dewey seeks to valorize the sensuous experience of perception without resorting to the ‘ideal’ or ‘spiritual.’

Perception, in its deepest sense, brings us awareness of the deeper truth that the world is not a simple place of nameable objects. Instead, perception reveals to us that the world is infinitely complex, mysterious and only dimly knowable. Perception is primary in establishing our relationship with the world, and so it is foundational to consciousness, it precedes consciousness. It, therefore, always contains something of the ineffable and unknowable since it is prior to knowing. For Chambers, perception is “that blind vision of unconscious intelligibility, never seen nor known except as unknowable.” (Chambers, 1978, p. 157) Chambers accepts this mystery and much of his work is aimed at eliciting the sense of this mystery. It is a reverential attitude towards reality. Those who misunderstand his philosophy often wrongly frame Dewey as a calculating pragmatist who rejects any notion of the mysterious or unknowable. I find his view to be the opposite, however. Dewey, like Chambers, has an incredibly reverential attitude in his acceptance of the limits of knowledge, “Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its integrity, mystery, doubt, and half knowledge

and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities – to imagination and art.” (Dewey, 1934 p. 277) The world is a much more mysterious place than we often experience it to be. We need to recover the sense of awe in ordinary experience. We especially need to intensify the sense of mystery in our encounters with the more-than-human world of nature. Purged of any sense of the sacred, the *other* world of nature is quickly becoming a mere bundle of resources, to be exploited for revenue or cheap beauty. Curiously, one of the ways by which I became more sensitive, more aware of the quiet beauty and mystery concealed in quotidian nature was through avant-garde cinema and Stan Brakhage’s films in particular. I would like to end with a short discussion of Brakhage’s work in relation to the themes I have been exploring.

Brakhage and the More-Than-Human

Most movies create a narrative out of their images. Avant-garde films are often more concerned with creating a kind of poetry out of their images. These films are often more suggestive than didactic. Many practitioners of the poetic cinema treat the filmic image as a canvas, choosing to emphasize the primarily visual elements of the cinema over ideas. They often deal with percepts rather than concepts, or, perception rather than recognition, as Dewey would put it. This is especially so for Stan Brakhage. Unlike mass-market entertainment, Brakhage’s films address the individual. They demand that the viewer meet them halfway, that is, they require creative participation. The viewer is asked to be a creative participant in creating meaning out of these films. We are conditioned by the dominant forms of the visual culture to be passive receivers of information. Meanings are established for us. Not so in these films. Most often, these films depart from ‘traditional’ modes of image making. I believe that Brakhage’s

aesthetics represent a form of vision that is more attuned to the more-than-human world of nature than most 'nature' films.

Central to Brakhage's art is the notion that the structure of language hinders our ability to see. In his early aesthetic credo *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage reveals a distrust for the Western conception of vision, "Imagine an eye," he says, "unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception" (Brakhage, 2001, p. 12). With a view similar to both Dewey and Chambers, Brakhage thought that language acted like a sieve, dividing the world into recognizable categories that reduce a potentially richer experience of the world. Linguistic structures, he believed, disengage us with a world that is otherwise "shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color" (Brakhage, 2001, p. 12). Brakhage believed that the cinema could provide us with a mode of communication that transcends the rigid boundaries of language, one that is primordial, to use the language of Merleau-Ponty, and addresses the primacy of perception in our being-in-the-world, a sensuous world in which we are enmeshed.

For Brakhage, there exists a pre-linguistic form of thinking that modernity has ignored. The cardinal feature of this primordial form of thought, which he later would call "moving visual thinking," is rhythm. As such, Brakhage's cinema is primarily based on rhythm. The cinema, so Brakhage thought, is unique among the arts in its ability to render, through visual rhythm, "the prime matter of thought before it passes through the filter of language." (Elder, 1998, p. 312) In addition to Dewey and Chambers, the notion that linguistic consciousness atrophies our visual perception is one that finds a parallel in

David Abram's work *The Spell of the Sensuous*. In that work, Abram traces a genealogy of our separation from the more-than-human world of nature, arguing that the rapid dissemination and transformation of the technology of writing served to enclose us within a world of our own making. Early pictographic symbols directly referenced the more-than-human world of nature. Symbols were actual representations of earthly phenomena. As symbols became increasingly abstracted, this reference to the more-than-human was lost. When this occurred, Abram argues, we slowly entered into a new form of consciousness, one whereby the primordial connection to the animate earth became tenuous. This being our inheritance, we have continued down a path of separation from the more-than-human. Abram notes, "Now caught up in a mass of abstractions...it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human." (Abram, 1997, p. 22)

Through the technology of cinema, Brakhage seeks to evoke the sense of the self that is prior to the formation of this enclosed linguistic consciousness, a self that remembers its carnal inherence in the world. It is a very Romantic notion of the self, which many opponents of Brakhage's art have been quick to point out. It seems bounded to the myth of an authentic self or to the notion of a fictitious pure past. Yet Brakhage's art cannot be entirely reduced to Romantic notions of a return to origins. Brakhage himself has stated, "One can never go back, not even in imagination...yet I suggest that there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word." (Brakhage, 2001, p. 12) It

would seem that Brakhage is not so much valorizing some mythic past so much as attempting to articulate an enigmatic form of vision that endures, albeit in an underdeveloped state, alongside language. This primal perception reveals to us that our bodies are connected to the animate earth, that we are always sensuously involved in the world. Abram also acknowledges that valorizing this more primal awareness is not a hope to return to some Edenic past, rather it is a matter of “coming full circle, uniting our capacity for cool reason with those more sensorial and mimetic ways of knowing, letting the vision of a common world root itself in our direct, participatory engagement with the local and the particular.” (Abram, 1997, p. 270)

Among the most important to Brakhage and most recurrent themes in his films are images of nature, the landscape, the more-than-human. His films, and the aesthetic values that inform their making, represent a valuable alternative to the majority of ‘nature films.’ Many so-called ‘nature’ films create false narratives about animal life, propagate the notion that nature requires human intervention by means of science, and contribute to an exaggerated dichotomization between nature and culture. I believe that many ‘nature’ films undermine the lived experience of natural environments. They are often prettified and completely exaggerated representations that serve to only diminish our real, embodied experiences. I believe that we continue to ignore and devastate the more-than-human world because we suffer from a failure of perception, an inability to find real aesthetic beauty in it. Brakhage’s cinema represents a genuine fascination with the expressivity and unspeakable beauty of the more-than-human. Alexander Wilson has argued that “the *exterior* world of reality has been disenchanted, purged of its spirit.” (Wilson, 1991, p. 122) Brakhage’s effort is a restorative one, to find the spirit in the

landscape. Many of his films seem to encourage an aesthetic intimacy with nature. They do not blunt our perceptive faculties, but rather stimulate them towards aesthetic perception by expressing a kind of heightened sensory interaction with nature.

One such film that expresses the beauty of the more-than-human world of earthly phenomena is *Commingled Containers* (1997). There is an almost scientific aesthetic that informs this film, as the close-ups of water bubbles resemble something of moving cells under a microscope, and yet Brakhage turns the film into a kind of light poem through the use of rhythmic editing, soft focus and paint applied directly to the filmstrip. He has called this film “an envisionment of the fleeting complexity of worldly phenomena.” (Brakhage, 2001, p. 215) He also comments about the title, which reveals much about his sense of nature: “Here’s the container of the bubbles in the container that the water is and the container that life is, and these are commingled containers.” (Brakhage, 2001, p. 215) Clearly, Brakhage views the human world as necessarily being in a reciprocal relation with the more-than-human. I believe he would indeed call his own body a container and his camera a container and that this film is ultimately an intersecting of all these things. For Brakhage, our flesh is one with the flesh of world – the body is the meeting place of internal and external energies. Brakhage involved his whole body when composing many of his photographed films. He even practiced bodily movements and exercises with his camera so that he might be able to render more accurately the sensations he encountered during filmmaking.

Another film entitled *The Wold Shadow* (1972) expresses the sense of connection with nature and its ability to enter into awareness. The inspiration that brought on the making of this film is indicative of his view of nature. An avid hiker, he had come to a

place in the forest where he was suddenly struck by the colours, shapes and shadows of the trees surrounding him. He found himself in an aesthetic encounter and returned with his camera to that same spot in order to film it. Finding that he could not adequately render his aesthetic experience with the camera alone, he set up a pane of glass between the camera and the area he was photographing and began to laboriously paint onto the glass so as to alter the scene he was filming. Brakhage is again expressing an interaction with nature, a kind of participation with the landscape. As one critic put it, “He discovers points of contact between external and inner bodily rhythms suggestive of a merging of consciousness and nature.” (Arthur, 2005, p. 209) In this film, he allows the forest to speak to him. He allows the phenomenal, more-than-human world of nature to instruct his own perception. As Abram would put it,

To directly perceive any phenomenon is to enter into relation with it, to feel oneself in a living interaction with another being. To define the phenomenon as an inert object, to deny the ability of a tree to inform and even instruct one’s awareness, is to have turned one’s senses away from that phenomenon. It is to ponder the tree from outside of its world, or, rather, from outside of the world in which both oneself and the tree are active participants. (Abram, 1997, p. 117)

Brakhage, in his relentless pursuit of new cinematic forms, was a true innovator of technique. Among the most lauded of his innovations are two films, *Mothlight* (1963) and *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981). For these two films, Brakhage pasted ephemera such as leaves, moth wings and flower petals directly on to the filmstrip. This represents an entirely new mode of representation, a new use of celluloid and projector whereby the stage of photography or animation is omitted. In this film, miniature objects

reveal stunning complexities as the mind picks up on details of the deep crevasses across blades of grass, tiny leaf veins in webbed patterns and the delicate ethereality of moth wings flooded with light, all set to a visual rhythm that makes a dance of minutiae. However one wants to interpret these films, it is simple enough to say that they are sensuous celebrations of natural beauty. I believe that Brakhage's cinema is made with the intent of waking up one's sensorium – to reveal the sensuality of sight, to re-corporealize vision. For me, these films have helped me pay greater attention to the often overlooked more-than-human world. Alexander Wilson makes the claim that we need to “build a culture that will nurture new relations with the natural world, relations built on harmony.” (Wilson, 1991, p. 109) This call cannot be heeded without the help of artists - artists who are sensitive enough to hear and see the harmony demanded of *us* in fostering this relationship. As Abram notes,

It may be that the new environmental ethic toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire – an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature – will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative strictures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us.

(Abram, 1997, p.69)

We live in an age where the flows of aural and visual information seem endless, where the sights and the sounds of the spectacle flood our senses ever more each year. In this environment, it becomes all too easy to be seduced by a world entirely of our own

making. We need, desperately, to regain contact with the more-than-human, and, somewhat paradoxically, I think films like these, by reawakening our sensorial connection to the world of phenomena, can help us do this.

Concluding Remarks

The habits of our cultural inheritance are ones that seem to purposefully denigrate the primacy of our immediate sensorial experiences. We have adopted a view of the world that treasures the notion of a reality that exists beyond, behind or above the senses. Greater primacy is often given to the transcendental realities offered by religions or to logical abstractions offered by science. Rarely do we give primacy to the truths disclosed to us within ordinary experience. What I believe all of these artists and thinkers have in common is a shared reverence and celebration for what is immediate and most readily experienced in the sensorial realm. They uplift the lowly – the commonplace, the quotidian, the mundane surroundings, objects and experiences that constitute daily living. In doing so, they reveal that what is truly worthy of reverence, what is truly sacred, is that which is ordinarily thought to be the least worthy of our attention. We have not cultivated an art of attention. We have cultivated an art of diversion, distraction and misdirection, all the while obscuring the radiant truth that literally lies as close to us as our own bodies.

A Personal Note on “Spiders in Eden”

The avant-garde filmmaker Peter Hutton offered the following comments about his film, which I would like to quote at length because I share the same spirit as Hutton in my own filmmaking:

“For the most part, people don’t allow themselves the time or the circumstances to get into a relationship with the world that provides freedom to actually look at

things. There's always an overriding design or mission behind their negotiation with life. I think when you have the occasion to step away from agendas – whether it's through circumstance or out of some kind of emotional necessity – then you're often struck by the incredible epiphanies of nature. These are often very subtle things, right at the edge of most people's sensibilities. My films try to record and to offer some of these experiences.” (Hutton, in MacDonlad, 1998, p. 243)

One of the things I wanted to achieve with this film was to get a sense of the varieties of responses to nature. Many of them are purely aesthetic responses; they speak to some deeper sensibility or awareness. Many of these responses are also culturally conditioned, some are ironic, informed by the popular media, and some of are also intellectual and cognitive, responses or ways of apprehending that I have learned through scholarship. This is why at times the film seems to be reverential towards nature and at other times nature seems perhaps unsettling. One moment I might be wondering at something, the next I may be dismissing it as some cultural fabrication and feel some sense of irony in the work.

Landscape always seemed to me to be the grandest of all subjects, because it is the taken-for-granted background. It is a powerful and permanent feature of our existence. In our time it is becoming more prescient because the land is finally speaking back to us, though not in the voice that whispered to us in the past. Now we hear a threat, a loss of resources. It's not a voice we turn to for consolation, praise, or reverence. Rather we listen in as a doctor listens to a patient, still imagining ourselves as stewards rather than acknowledging our rootedness in this earth.

I firmly believe that our actions are in some way connected to the way that we view the world. The very structure and limits of our perception are bound up with our activity in the world. Our perceptual boundaries form the horizons of our actions. This is why, as Dewey stresses, aesthetics precede ethics. This is the secret that art knows so well; that our aesthetic sensibility underlies so much of our thinking. It touches a deeper root.

The landscape in cinema has a varied history. Most often it serves merely as the background; the setting with which to tell a story. Other filmmakers give a larger role to it, such as Andrei Tarkovsky or Terrence Malick. To me, it is the avant-garde filmmakers who truly give landscape its due. P. Adams Sitney, a scholar of the avant-garde, has claimed,

“The primary achievement of the avant-garde cinema in this area has been to force a contemplation of the natural world in different mediations by the cinematic apparatus. The landscapes of the narrative cinema, as Eisenstein and Bazin suggest, are latent expressionistic theatres, confronting or echoing the minds of the human figures within them. But there is a fundamental change of aesthetic orientation when there is no actress in the scene, no body on which the snowflake can land. Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage, Chris Welsby and other landscape film-makers have used cinema to look at the natural beauty of the world, and in watching their films we share their surprise and excitement at the disjunctions and the meshing of the rhythms of the world and the temporality of the medium.” (Sitney, 1993, p. 125)

In the same essay, Sitney argues convincingly of an analogy between Brakhage's film *Creation* and the creation myth of Genesis. I'd seen this film years ago and had not made the connection. The analogy is deployed with such subtlety that it is easily missed, but rewarding to understand finally.

In my film, I was also preoccupied with Genesis, particularly the notion of the Garden of Eden. Our usual interpretation of the myth of the fall is a kind of cautionary tale. We interpret the act of eating the fruit as a transgression, an offense that we are paying for. But there is another way of interpreting the story. Perhaps it's more fruitful to see it as an illumination. In the Garden of Eden there was no strife, no separation. We were not aware of death and so we had no fear. We were mindlessly comfortable. But with knowledge, with the clarity of consciousness, we suddenly became the bearers of responsibility, an incredibly uncomfortable position. Consciousness, knowledge of our own being and the vulnerability that entails that awareness, is the source of our anxieties, but it is also the source of all that allows to appreciate, to find beauty, and to act purposefully in the world. Because we are self-conscious we are responsible for our actions. We also have a new insight that alone allows us to appreciate beauty. In the Garden of Eden we were not divided, and so all things remained permanent, unchanging, timeless and therefore, without beauty. The snake, a symbol of transformation, changed that, and Eve, in her wisdom, intuited that it was good to wake up, as painful as that might be.

In Gnostic mythology, the snake in the Garden of Eden is actually a higher deity than the original creator. The snake harbored a transformative power. It was higher up on the Gnosis scale. The snake allowed Adam and Eve to wake up finally, and realize the

beauty of the garden around them. In my film I replace the snake with a spider. I think the spider is a compelling symbol. Spiders are objects of fear, much like the snake. They also seem to have some power to organize their surroundings, because they spin webs, and this seemed significant to me as a symbol. They have to create their own environment; they need to separate themselves from the rest of nature by creating these beautiful, crystalline structures in which they live suspended. I felt that was an interesting way of thinking about humans, because we are also separate from nature, and fashion for ourselves an environment of our own making. This ideal environment is a garden. As Jordan Peterson points out, paradise is a walled garden. It is a bounded enclave, but it is not entirely divorced from chaotic nature. Instead, it exists in relation to that nature. A Garden is that place where the forces of nature and culture are in perfect balance. It is beyond nature, because it has been formed by human hands, but it is also beyond culture, because the plants, the trees, the water and the light are all transcendent.

I imagined the film to be Eve's awakening from the mindlessness of the prelapsarian condition to a newfound vision, a new way of seeing. In this myth, I don't see the Fall as a loss, rather it is a new beginning. Landscape seemed the appropriate way to express this sentiment, however hidden these meanings are. P. Adams Sitney, remarked that in Brakhage's film creation, "The point of the analogy to Genesis seems to be that an honest and fresh encounter with the presence of a sublime landscape has the power of a moment of origin." (Sitney, 1993, p. 121) I too think that landscape has this power, so primordial that it can stir feelings that are doubtless as old as humanity itself.

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