

INTRODUCTION: AESTHETICS, ETHICS, AND RELATIONAL BEING

In June 2024, the Annual Conference of *The Nordic Society for Aesthetics* was held in Iceland for the first time, with the theme ‘Aesthetics, Ethics and Relational Being’. Hosting the NSAE Annual Conference was thus an important event to promote and increase interest in theoretical and artistic dialogues on aesthetics within the Icelandic context. The field of aesthetics is a vital part of the philosophical dialogue, and an important platform for taking on current challenges. We, the organizers of the conference and editors of this special issue, find that in the midst of the ongoing polycrisis, becoming more attuned to the aesthetic dimension and more capable of discussing and valuing it, is of critical importance. In our call for contributions, we therefore asked: *What could be the role(s) of aesthetics in this rapidly changing world, where there is a pressing need for re-thinking values, value systems, and the relationship we have to the future of the planet we inhabit?*

The responses we received to the call for conference papers showed that these questions resonate with many. The conference had over 70 presenters and five keynote speakers; philosophers Arnold Berleant, Emily Brady, and Yuriko Saito and the Icelandic artist team Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. The high quality and diversity of contributions to the conference inspired us to document the event in the form of this special issue, so now a year later, we have brought together three articles based on the keynote lectures from Berleant, Saito, and Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson along with twelve articles from other conference participants.

In addition to these articles, this special issue on ‘Aesthetics, Ethics and Relational Being’ also includes two interviews conducted by Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir—one with Arnold Berleant and the other with Yrjö Sepänmaa. Both Berleant and Sepänmaa have been leading voices within the field of environmental aesthetics; a field that has at its core many of the questions encouraged by the NSAE 2024 conference call. These include inquiries relating to the environment, concepts such as care and wellbeing, everyday experience, and the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. The environmental being, explored by environmental aesthetics, is relational being. These two interviews provide readers, many of whom hopefully will continue to engage with questions of environmental aesthetics, with insights into the early developments of this field, as well as inspiration for future directions. As the title of the NSAE annual conference held in Helsinki in June 2025 suggests, *aesthetics*, as everything else in the world, is *at a crossroads*. At crossroads, being aware of and learning from the past is essential to be able to find our way into the future.

It was a great honour that Berleant could participate in the conference through a video call. This small, yet world-changing technology also made it possible to continue an interview process that was initiated by philosopher and artist Emeline Eudes at the IIAA Summer conference held in Messilä, Lahti, in 2008, where both Berleant and Saito were keynote speakers. Eudes, together with Jóhannesdóttir, who back then was a PhD student attending the conference in Messilä, started an email exchange with Berleant. However, life took its turns and the

project was never finished. The inspiration from Berleant's work and spirit continued to shape both of these young researchers' paths and it is therefore a great pleasure to finally meet at another crossroads to bring to completion the process that begun in Finland. This is one of many stories of international collaborations and connections that have emerged in the many conferences and events dedicated to environmental aesthetics in Finland over the past decades.¹ With the intention of learning more about the roots of Finland's strong focus on environmental aesthetics, Jóhannesdóttir also interviewed Yrjö Sepänmaa, a professor of environmental aesthetics, whose early interest in the field seems to have played an important role in shaping its place in Finnish philosophy. Sepänmaa has recently published a book in Finnish on the future of environmental aesthetics, and the interview gives insight into some of its topics. Hopefully, it will also be an encouragement to more Nordic scholars to participate in shaping this future.

This issue opens with the two interviews introduced above and is followed by the three articles based on the conference's keynote lectures. Those together set the tone for various topics covered in the following articles developed from conference papers. Berleant and Saito direct our attention to our everyday landscapes and objects and show us each in their own way how changing the way we speak about our relationship with the world can shift the way we experience it. In his paper, "The Poetics of Landscape," Arnold Berleant provides us with an understanding of landscape as a relationship; a relation of environment and human presence, and thereby gives the reader the opportunity

to reevaluate their everyday landscape experience, by understanding the meaning of the words we use to speak of them in a novel way. His paper sets the tone for many of the articles in this issue which explore our core relational being, and its entanglement with other selves, forms of life and the environments we inhabit. Saito's writings have had many of us experience everyday acts like hanging laundry in a different way. After hearing her lecture in Reykjavik in 2024, some of us might also have begun to experience our caring relationship with the objects within our environments differently. Readers, who did not participate in the conference, will hopefully experience this shift by reading Saito's paper "The Role of Care in Environmental Aesthetics," which sets the tone for several other articles in this issue that center on the concept of care. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's "Strategies of Aesthetics on Conflicted Borders" sets the tone for another set of articles in this issue authored by practicing artists/researchers who give us valuable insights into their artistic and aesthetic practices. In their paper, Snæbjörnsdóttir & Wilson provide an intimate look into their artistic practice, they reflect on the role of careful and strategic aesthetic decision-making in art production and explore the possibilities of thinking through different mediums and strategies.

The five papers that follow all explore the concept of *care*, although in very different contexts. In her paper, "Delving into the Patchiness of the world: Mycelial Orientations towards Practices of Sensing, Sharing, and Caring," Sarah Kolb uses fungi in multiple ways to analyse and recontextualize some of the challenges we face today. In the paper, the world of mushrooms,

and their way of being, is not only offered as a kind of a metaphor for alternative ways of categorizing and engaging with the world and thereby transcending conventional practices, but also as a case study from which we can learn. Annette Vandsø and Nick Shepherd examine two artworks featuring weeds and houseplants in their paper “Expanded Aesthetics: Care, Attention, and the Everyday Plant,” and demonstrate how these artworks broaden or expand our perception and experience of plants. They argue that “expanded” aesthetic sensibility that entangles historical, political, aesthetic, and economic concerns is emblematic of our climatically changing world.

Mami Aota draws on aspects of Yuriko Saito’s aesthetics of care to analyse and reshape the concept of urban development. In “Urban Redevelopment and Aesthetics of Care: ‘Nested Care’ as a Framework for Urban Transformation,” recent development projects in Tokyo are used as case studies to highlight the key factors, indicators, processes and concepts that are essential for envisioning urban redevelopment within the cityscape of a modern city. Aota makes a strong case for the relevance of Saito’s ideas to urban planning; especially when it comes to history and temporality within the urban context, and the broader concept of the city. In her paper, “Environmental Wellbeing: Moving From a ‘Care’ Imperative to a ‘Protection’ Imperative,” Sue Spaid proposes a definition of environmental wellbeing that is on par with human wellbeing and ultimately argues that the “protection” imperative proves more successful than the abstract “care” imperative to promote environmental wellbeing.

The next three papers have the common thread of exploring the relation and entanglement of art and science. In his paper “Creative Holobionts: Conrad Waddington and the Intra-action of Science, Art and Philosophy,” Ole Martin Sandberg argues for a new structure of knowledge making, against a hierarchy where hard science sits at the top, and the arts at the bottom, he suggests instead a model he calls *creative holobiont* (a concept appropriated from theories in biology by Lynn Margulis). He argues that a new way of approaching knowledge-making would enable us to understand relationality, the structure of human reality, and even humanity as such, in a more grounded and thoughtful way. Picking up on the tone struck by Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson’s paper, Garrison Gerrard and Sophie Erlund et al. share their processes of aesthetic decision-making in the making of their artworks *Ecosystem [512]* (Gerrard, 2024) and *Nature is an event that never stops* (Erlund, 2023). In his paper, the “Aesthetics of Soundscape Ecology and Music Composition,” Garrison Gerrard draws on the creative process behind one of his own compositions, *Ecosystem [512]* to pry open the field of aesthetic and embodied experience of nature. One of his main subjects is the role of silence in our engagement with nature and natural sound, and in his paper he explores how composition can be a tool to investigate this engagement from an aesthetic and ecological point of view. In “Designing for Relational Complexity: The Role of Interdisciplinary Strategies in Art,” Sophie Erlund, Samuel E. Tepper, Andreas Roepstorff, Katrin Heimann, and Cordula Vesper together explore the role of interdisciplinary strategies in their own art, practice at the intersection of cognitive science, art and virtual reality as it

appears in Erlund's VR artwork *Nature is an event that never stops*. The artwork is made in dialogue with cognitive scientist Curdula Vesper and a group of researchers participating in the research project *Experimenting, Experiencing, Reflecting*. In this collaboration, the logics of the aesthetic and the scientific intertwine—"each contaminating the purity of the other," as the authors put it, and this expands the possibilities of both.

The next two papers explore the intersection of politics and aesthetics. Marteinn Sindri Jónsson continues thinking through artistic practices in his paper "Aesthetics and Crisis in the New 'New Iceland'" where he explores recent socio-political developments in Iceland since 2008. In his paper, he examines how Angela Dimitrakaki's 2017 analysis of the New "New Europe" may be adapted to the Icelandic context. His analysis is guided by a range of aesthetic practices that respond, enact or engage in some way with the realities of what may succinctly be termed the New "New Iceland." As its title "Do Clouds have Politics? Reflections on Aesthetic Encounters and Nature," suggests, Chris Dunn's paper addresses a discourse concerning the relationship between nature and the political. At the heart of the inquiry is whether and to what extent nature's display can be understood as providing a vantage or connection to something beyond human power relations.

The final three papers are dedicated to exploring everyday experiences, friendship and care for the self, using examples from literature. In "Towards an Aesthetics of Friendship: Ali Smith's Autumn," Christian Refsum defends a view of friendship

that relies more fundamentally on the mutual appreciation of shared experiences, and the spaces they create, rather than only on friends' unique characteristics. Through his reading of Ali Smith's novel *Autumn*, Refsum also aims to show that the novel genre is a particularly rich source for exploring the significance of friendship. Turning to care for the self and world, Alexandra Hayes explores the nature of our relationship with beauty and what it should entail in "The Ascetic Aesthete: How Asceticism is the Right Relationship to Beauty, Real Care for the Self, and Love for the World." She argues that the right relationship to beauty is an ascetic one and a matter of constant training, re-evaluating, and witnessing ourselves and the world. Joachim Aagaard Friis explores tenderness as more-than-human relationality in contemporary Danish literature in his paper "Tenderness as more-than-human relationality in Pernille Abd-El Dayem's *Omsorgsdage*." The concept of tenderness, when employed as an analytical tool on examples from literature, becomes for him not only a disposition towards other persons, but a way to talk about and conceptualize more-than-human relationality. He argues that the space created in literature for tenderness and vulnerability can be a useful tool for "cultivating tender relations to more than human environments."

As editors of this special issue of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, we hope this collection of papers will contribute to a discussion that is becoming increasingly relevant in today's world. The role of aesthetics is changing and it is vital that this transformation is analysed, articulated and connected to lived experiences. We hope that the different perspectives,

arguments and discussions presented in this issue will be a part of that ongoing conversation. We would like to thank our generous peer reviewers, artists and scholars that contributed to this special issue, as well as to the editors of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* and the board of *The Nordic Society for Aesthetics* for the opportunity to bring this publication to the public.

— Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir, Jóhannes Dagsson,
and Una Thorláksdóttir

- 1 Arto Haapala, "Contemporary Finnish Aesthetics," *Philosophy Compass* 6, no. 1 (2011): 1-10.