

CALL FOR PAPERS FOR INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
Aesthetics in Times of Turmoil: A Conference on Intersections between Art and Ecology
March 22–23, 2024

CENTRE FOR PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE
King's University College at Western University, Canada

The conference will include keynote addresses from Paul Harris (Loyola Marymount University), Nina Zitani (Western University), and Jan Zwicky (Emerita, University of Victoria).

THEME

During intensifying ecological turbulence and geopolitical conflict, entrenched habits of thought might suggest that questions of the aesthetic and the beautiful are dispensable luxuries. Such attitudes presume an image of the aesthetic complicit with what Levinas calls a “dimension of evasion” and thus assume a metaphysical separation between human cultural practice and natural processes that is one conceptual root of ecological dysfunction.

While such attitudes are understandable given the gravity of our interlocking planetary crises, they are based on deeply mistaken assumptions about aesthetics, the relation between contemplation of beauty and images of nature, and questions of spirit and sensibility in fostering ecological-being. This conference begins from the premise that the ecological crisis is partly a crisis in aesthetics. Even as part of this crisis lies in confusion over what is considered material necessities, it also arises through a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of beauty in fostering awareness of interconnections, human limits, and experience of the good as distinct from self-centered ego gratification. For these reasons, we suggest that the experience of beauty is a necessity that has been rendered contingent, while the possession of excessive and empty consumer goods are contingencies that have been packaged as necessities for happiness.

Such claims are starting points for ontological, ethical, historical, transcultural, and phenomenological inquiry. How might aesthetic experience be conceived in terms of ontologies of nature that emphasize its creative and dynamic force and agency? In what sense is aesthetic experience necessary for cultivating ecological virtues of deep attention to place? Can we conceive of art practices to foster relational ways of being that challenge the embedded anthropocentrism of dominant infrastructures and institutions? Is the marginalization of aesthetic experience part of the early modern European historical movement that set into motion the extractive, exploitative, and imperial ideologies still driving the present planetary crisis? In what sense is this marginalization furthered by the disconnect between the material conditions of art practice and packaging the aesthetic as a high-status consumer item? Is the subjective turn in European aesthetics indicative of a rupturing from earlier traditions, and if so, how might we recover a sense of aesthetic experience as part of a shared sense of the ecological as sacred? Is such a conception of beauty still relevant in our fractured and pluralistic times? The specific dynamics of different cultural aesthetic traditions, including broadly what we might call ‘Eastern’

and Indigenous ways of conceiving and practicing beauty, need to be investigated to consider this question. How might we theorize a turn to the planetary in studying different aesthetic traditions? Suppose the ecological crisis and its attendant geopolitical symptoms call for new cultural epistemes and modes of sensibility. Can the study and encounter of differing aesthetic traditions contribute to their emergence?

These questions call for study and dialogue amongst thinkers with diverse skill sets and scholarly and creative practices. Indeed, because aesthetic experience, ecological sensibility, creative practice, and contemplative exercises cut across traditional disciplinary divides, this conference is conceived as intentionally interdisciplinary, with our keynotes drawn from Philosophy (Dr. Jan Zwicky), the Earth Sciences (Dr. Nina Zitani) and Literature and Arts (Dr. Paul Harris). Each keynote combines their disciplinary background with active creative practice. Nina Zitani will draw on her extensive practice cultivating biodiversity gardens from a life science and aesthetic perspective. Jan Zwicky is an internationally recognized poet in addition to her work as a philosopher. Paul Harris is a literary scholar, and Pierre Jardin is a self-described “rock gardener and stone whisperer.”

To pursue this topic and themes, the Centre for Philosophy and Culture will host an international conference on March 22 and 23rd, 2024, in London, Ontario, Canada. This conference is part of a larger project in the history of philosophy, environmental ethics, religious studies, and aesthetics associated with the international research group ([WGEA](https://wgea.foranewearth.org/)). [https://wgea.foranewearth.org.](https://wgea.foranewearth.org/)

We hope to attract a range of disciplinary perspectives and traditions and invite abstracts (300 words maximum) from interested parties. While the conference will be primarily in person, there is some potential for virtual attendance. Please note if this is your interest in your email submission. **Please email abstract proposals for anonymous review to carep@kings.uwo.ca by January 5, 2024. All submissions will be equally reviewed.**