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Aesthetics Project

1 On the aesthetic value of mosses and lichens

Mosses are small plants that grow all around us. Generally found on the ground, rocks, trees, or man-made structures, moss is a resilient monocot that can survive in many conditions, return quickly after catastrophes, and fill ecological niches that would otherwise go uncared for. Lichen, often mistaken for moss, are in fact a symbiotic relationship between algae and fungi. Fungi are quite hardy and can grow anywhere, but cannot produce their own energy and must break down other organisms to survive. Algae, on the other hand, are generally quite fragile organisms that live exclusively in calm aqueous environments, efficiently using sunlight and carbon dioxide to multiply itself indefinitely. Combining algae and fungus to create lichen creates a durable “plant” that has many of the same characteristics as moss. These “microplants” (please note that this is no way a scientific term or classification, merely an informal catch-all term I will be using to refer organisms that are often confused with moss) are greatly diverse in their appearance, ranging from tiny gardens to imitation seaweed. Whole ranges of textures and colours, they thrive best with other plants, but left to their own devices can take over relatively large swathes. In cities, they are omnipresent. Not one tree in Halifax is devoid of such hanger-ons, and moss is a main feature of most residential roofs.

The appearance and lifestyle of microplants is unlike anything that humans are used to, making them a difficult part of nature to see as aesthetic in the classical sense. Very rarely are they subjects unto themselves, being subjected to mere detail work when they are represented in art, arguably because they are outside our experiences. While thousands of fascinating and

complex species of moss exist, vastly outnumbering apples, oranges, and grapes combined, I have yet to find a still life painting featuring one. Berleant's ideas of aesthetics as an active interaction sheds some light on how we perceive with microplants. Berleant urges you, the aesthetic critic, to actively *keep feeling* and stay curious. By using all the senses, not just the ocular as classical aesthetics does, he encourages us to see ourselves as a part of the environment that classical aesthetics tells us we are only an observer of. This is the missing link that allows microplants to be aesthetic subjects in their own right instead of being a mere detail.

Microplants look alien up close, revealing a landscape totally foreign to our macroscopic eyes, though this is tough experience to get with classical aesthetics. These tiny pieces of nature are often ignored, seen as mould-adjacent and treated like poisonous bugs, curiosity is the only way to break that assumption. A curiosity born from the thought "ooh, that looks neat" that drives us to engage with the subject on a deeper level. Microplants fill niches that larger organisms cannot, so each tells a distinct story of the world around them. Beard lichen (a species of lichen that resemble a clump of wiry light-green beard-hair, often found near American red chestnut tree in the quad) only grows on dying trees, yet cannot tolerate almost no pollution. A beautiful organism in it's own right, it can also foster an appreciation for other details of the surrounding area that might otherwise go unseen. Seeing oneself as part of the environment, not as a distinct and passive observer, opens the door to exploring the environment and discovering more aesthetic experiences. Berleant urges us to leave no stone unturned, and to check the bottoms of them too, in case any hidden treasures lay in wait. Enjoy each and every detail in as many ways as you can, from the soaring redwoods to the microplants that grow on its trunk.

2 Why the Killam is a manifestation of suicidal ideology

Since the Killam was constructed in 1966, the students who visit it unanimously agree that it makes you want to kill yourself.¹ It looks like an architectural student with a fetish for brutalism and cubism drew the plans for it on the back of a napkin, which is to say it is a rather large and ugly concrete cube. Should Halifax ever find itself in need of a prison designed specifically for crushing hope, shockingly few modifications to the Killam would be needed to convert it.

Built in 1966 with a massive grant from someone with the name Killam, it has largely remained the same since then. When it was originally constructed, the centre of it was not enclosed. Instead, it sported a sad attempt at a small garden that was, in reality, a concrete cesspool that was home to frogs and whatever else could survive that kind of ecological hellscape. For entirely understandable reasons, the top was covered with glass and the water feature was replaced with a food court a mere five years later. In 2010 there was a proposed plan to turn the west wall into glass, though this was scrapped for reasons generally unpondered by people who prefer to think well of the university. Instead, the 3rd floor was renovated in 2016 to make it ever so slightly more oppressive by adding further divisions. The 2016 changes highlighted exactly what the issue was: the Killam is isolating. New rooms meant for connecting students ended up being more walls to bang your head against.

The building is offers nothing more than books and a crippling feeling of isolation. It does not need to be that way, nor does fixing require the massive amount of cash that the admin is unwilling to provide. A profound lack of windows is not ideal, though unrectifiable without demolition. Connexion is the opposite of isolation. The pond failed because it was inaccessible, and turning it a food court made intra-personal connexions slightly more possible at the cost of severing the only connexion to nature and therefore the outside world. Inside the Killam, the outside world stops. To use the language of Berleant, it is a totally disengaged experience.

Re-engaging with the outside is impossible without the aforementioned impossible windows and

¹Dr. Laura Penny reports that students' sentiments have not changed since she was there as student herself, back when it still had a pond

is therefore impossible. Any engagement in the Killam must come from within, something made extraordinarily difficult with the highly segmented architecture. Removing enough walls to make students feel less trapped would result in structural collapse, so that solution won't work either. What is needed is a central point of connexion that can lift spirits and engage the community.

My proposed solution gets right to the heart of issue and only costs a few hundred dollars: buy some remote control helicopters. The central column was designed to be seen from the library, a feature that became creepy once it turned into a food court. If a few RC flying toys were left for students to play with, the entire experience could be changed. Imagine studying on the fourth floor (the least worst if you ask me) and watching a few helicopters float and buzz around. Is there a risk of them falling on students? Absolutely, which adds to the fun. It lightens the mood and gives you something to watch other than the walls, and it is a reminder that others exist. Seeing a helicopter means that another suicidal student in the Killam has taken a break from their studying to relax in the common area. Even a momentary break from the monotony of the self-same concrete can be enough to engage with. The Killam is ugly, even from the inside, because it is isolating, so the only way make it prettier is to help connect those trapped within it's walls.

3 Mary Mattingly: Dystopian ecological art for urbanites

Ecological art inherently reflects the characteristics of ecology. In any given ecosystem, an uncountably many organisms come together to form a stable network that gives each an equitable chance of survival. Every creature has certain roles and fills certain niches, and learns to adapt (and even evolve!) when the environment changes. This can be difficult with the unprecedented rate and scale at which humans modify their environments, even for humans, though life inevitably finds a way forward. For example, the London Underground is home a species of mosquito that adapted to suck mammalian blood instead of avian during the Blitz.² So too does art grow to adapt to urban environment, finding untapped niches that help it to thrive.

Mary Mattingly is an active ecological artist operating primarily out of New York City. Her work puts an emphasis on the fragility of urban ecology, raising issues such as food and water scarcity in cities, and the rise of dependence on mass-manufactured material goods. While her portfolio³ is substantial, I think one of her most important recurring themes is the question of what life looks like when capitalism inevitably fails. She asks this question most pointedly in three main projects: Flock House(s) (2012-2017), Wetland (2014-2016), Swale (2016-). All three projects are variations on theme of futuristic self-sustaining habitats designed to be embedded in highly urban environments. The Flock Houses were small, terrestrial geodesic domes, whereas Wetland and Swale are both built on top of boats. Mattingly describes Wetland as “a floating sculpture, a living structure, [and] a public space,” designed to show people how a semi-enclosed ecosystem can be self sustaining. Much of her work focuses on showcasing sustainable long-term survival techniques, like grey-water filtration, renewable energy set up and management, gardening, and beekeeping. Visitors are encouraged to take what they need, be it fresh vegetables or the knowledge of how to grow them yourself.

Swale is a garden barge that is currently floating around the harbours of NYC, pulling in to open ports to invite the public to step aboard. Growing vegetables in public parks is illegal, and

²There is some debate as to whether it is in fact a new species or just an endemic variation, but this a pedantic argument best left to people wearing lab coats

³Seen here (marymattingly.com)

Mattingly cites this as large part of her inspiration. The Bronx are one of the most severe food deserts in America (which is to say there are a lot of people who live very far from any food source), and it is this issue that Mattingly is constantly striving to fix. In the event of urban ecosystem collapse, hundred of thousands of people would be unable to eat. Whereas other ecological artists focus on the environment, Mattingly is specifically concerned with interactions of the living creatures in them. Andy Goldsworthy, for example, is an environmental and not an ecological artist because he has zero concern for the local flora and fauna. His stunt of dumping iron-rich mud into a stream to turn it red for one photo most likely devastated the micro-organisms living in it, causing widespread damage to the ecosystem as a whole. Mattingly's approach is the polar opposite, trying to foster new ecosystem that can expand to fill ecological niches and learn to thrive in a hostile and changing environment. She does so by providing learning experiences that helps people ask questions like "what is your relationship with fresh food?" and "how is all of it connected?" so that they can begin to reflect on their role in the ecosystem they live in. Ecological art should be a motivating and inspiring force that teaches us to live symbiotically in a time when it is all to easy to feel divorced from nature, and I think Mattingly is a perfect example of someone who puts principle in to practice in absolutely stunning ways.