Coming to our senses: Understanding our place in the natural world through embodied experiences of art

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The paper examines the role of art and artistic education in contributing to the changes in beliefs and value systems that are needed to respond effectively to the climate crisis we are currently facing. We are scientifically informed about the perils of climate change. Yet it seems hard to make this knowledge hit home. From a philosophical point of view, there is something in our understanding about ourselves and our place as humans in the natural world that blinds us in matters of environmental concern. Environmental ethics and posthumanist ethics have thus been instrumental in advancing a different understanding of man that challenges traditional, philosophical conceptions of the human as separated from its environment. Yet, such ethical knowledge does also not hit home hard enough to generate more widespread acknowledgement that effectuates change in our disposition to nature and the environment. I argue that the type of knowledge that is needed is aesthetically perceived sensuous knowledge that hits hearts and stomachs rather than rational minds. Yet this embodied knowledge informs our emotions and our actions, in much more effective ways than scientific or ethical arguments expressed in words and numbers. Through artistic embodied experiences, art and artistic education are able to offer a fuller notion of the sense of embodiment that is the basis of environmental and posthumanist ethics achievement of having integrated the human subject into the environment.

In the paper I will discuss how aesthetic experiences of nature are cultivated in educational, artistic contexts. I will analyse two examples, Ólafur Elíasson’s Riverbed and Björk’s Biophilia project, and discuss how the body is involved in the sensuous experiences and the cognitive associations these artistic projects represent.

Keywords: environmental ethics, Embodied experiences, posthuman ethics, artistic education

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