As the conditions and paradigms of the global environmental crisis transform before our very eyes, a question emerges: How can environmental activism improve, when the conditions that challenge it are so new, vast, and abstract? How will the environmental movement change to meet the abstraction that is this crisis of human infrastructure, weather, and gas?

Sasha Engelmann answers these questions by turning our critical attention to the philosophical and cultural assumptions that have driven recent environmental protest groups such as Greenpeace. If the environmentalist movement is to meet the crisis at hand, she argues, it must embrace a philosophy more amenable to the ‘new nature’ that is the world in warming. Instead of tailoring their rhetoric to the dark iconography of oil derricks, environmentalists might teach us to mark the experiential texture of living in a world of weather.

In this regard, Sasha argues that the art of Olafur Eliasson and the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty can provide us with the rhetorical frame we need. How will this vision look in the context of actual protests? That is the urgent question of this beautiful essay, and it is one that will be answered in the years to come.

—Scott Herndon
Here, there is no white cube, no carefully spaced series of rectangles on the wall. There are no points of focus signified by elaborate bronze frames. I do not feel compelled to pay attention to detail, read captions and important dates or walk in a prescribed path. In fact, all that is required of me is to absorb, feel, and interact where I am tempted. Once inside Olafur Eliasson’s installation, I am entirely seduced into a realm of pure perception.

The Icelandic light and space artist Olafur Eliasson has become, through his work and philosophy, a post-modern sensation. His installations are at once marvels of natural material and unnerving reflective environments, where viewers are given leading roles in the art’s construction and are offered new lenses through which to perceive natural elements such as water, light, and organic matter. Eliasson effectively decouples natural forces from their traditional molds. His work is startling for this reason, and its value is found not only in the initial reactions of the audience to the installation but also in the way it sensitizes individuals to the infinite number of perceptual shifts possible in their interaction with familiar elements in daily life. Eliasson’s work is seductive, spectacular, and therefore memorable; evidence of his rise in popularity was seen when thousands flocked to the Tate Modern to experience his grand installation, The Weather Project. More than any other contemporary light and space artist, Eliasson has attained a position of great influence on the international stage while preserving for every viewer a delicate interactive experience.
But Eliasson’s work is more than a body of aesthetic phenomena. Its importance lies in its ability to elegantly fuse the creation of spectacle with the consequence of a fundamental shift in individual perception of natural elements, sculpting a new interface between the human and the natural. Given the forces of imbalance that have historically altered man’s relationship to nature and the continuing discourse surrounding the human impact on our planet’s atmosphere, it is easy to credit Eliasson’s work with the primary purpose of quiet protest on behalf of the pristine natural resources that have been lost to the modern citizen. If it would be misleading to ascribe a direct eco-activist purpose to Eliasson’s art or attribute to it a rhetoric of protest, his installations nonetheless do effect a reconstruction of perceptual boundaries between man and environment, indirectly realigning cultural paradigms on civilization’s role in interacting with Earth.

Eliasson might almost have committed the principles of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* to memory. His work offers a departure from rationalist divisions separating modern culture and environment and cultivates a paradigm of mutual and receptive co-evolution between humans and the biosphere. And while his art is not in itself a new environmental rhetoric, it serves to show us how a philosophy more conducive to an ecological sharing of the Earth can be communicated and practiced in an effective, tangible way. There is a lesson here that extends far beyond the techniques of avant-garde art. Eliasson’s idiosyncratic methodological approach to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenalism actually has the potential to inform and improve the tactics of modern environmental protest. Such thinking can extend to groups like Greenpeace, who all too often perpetuate a hierarchical divide between society and nature for the sake of global media attention. And Eliasson’s phenomenalist approach to the natural may help inform a new set of global paradigms, leaning toward sustainability and long-term interaction between society and ecosystems. Ultimately, tenets of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy may be expressed in the actions of leading environmental organizations so that ingrained paradigms on environment—the first set of rhetorical frames that binds progress to sustainability and climate change mitigation—may be broken.

**NOTION MOTION**

*My eyes register darkness as moisture and coolness touch my skin. After a few seconds there is a wall of gray, lucidly glowing and slightly pulsating before me. As I walk farther into the room I feel a floorboard creak under my foot, and I am startled by a movement on the opposite wall. I test the floorboard again.*
weight of my foot creates a ripple that travels up from a point in the bottom center of the wall to the ceiling, in greater and greater rings. It is like standing on a dock by the edge of a placid lake, yet now the water is a vertical front. It is unnerving and quieting at the same time.

I find myself in a fluid environment where I have influence. Even the smallest movement by my weight creates a response in the water, as if the moving surface is answering the curiosity in my action. The grayness is melancholy and the light ripples are meditative, offering rhythm. I am suspended in a universe where light and water are the only materials, and the artistic canvass transcends the limits of the wall.

I instantly recall memories of the Adriatic Sea. On one summer visit to my mother’s family on the island of Hvar in Croatia, I remember standing at the edge of the small dock that stretched into the warm waters of the bay, watching light play off the restless surfaces. But immersed in Olafur Eliasson’s installation Notion Motion I am also aware that the waterscape in front of me is contrived, disjointed from association with the natural element itself despite the memories it evokes. This is not the water that revealed darting motions of fish in flight, bright corals and wild seaweed. It is too austere, too willful. This waterscape assumes an autonomy that is at once startling, yet without the implication of immediate danger. Staring at the face of this fluid projection I feel enveloped and overwhelmed with the powerful presence of a force beyond my control and even my immediate understanding.

The water is denaturalized, and my suspicion that the water holds the power in the room is enforced through Eliasson’s intentional exposure of the framework behind the screen. A passage leads around the back of the wall, where I can clearly see that a spotlight projects ripples from the surface of a shallow pool onto a scrim that forms the vertical wall in the installation. When a person steps onto a certain floorboard in the adjacent room, a string pulls a small flap of wood that disturbs the water behind the scrim, and the disturbance then translates to the projection. Yet when people are tempted to jump on the floorboards, the flap of wood transmits nothing more violent to the pool, therefore limiting human interference with the rippling projection. The impact of the visitor is tempered in scope so that one can animate the work, but never overwhelm the calm that is central to the work’s presentation.
This effortless combination of spectacle, interaction, and demystification found in Notion Motion is a mark of Eliasson’s installations. In the liminal space between wood and water, familiarity and uncertainty, action and reception, I am forced to allow myself to simply exist with and accept the elements that I perceive, however strange this immediately feels. It is in this visceral state that the work is realized so that now I am free to rethink my relationship to water and light. And it is here that I experience an artistic representation of nature that is beyond any landscape painting I have seen framed on a wall. The most fundamental shift that Eliasson’s work intimates is that of breaking the traditional frame of the landscape in its role as metonym for ingrained cultural philosophy on nature. By defying the white cube of gallery presentation and the repeated formulae of landscape portrayal in art, Eliasson rebels against the paradigms of nature as conquest, nature as Eden, and nature as an unfathomable, indestructible phenomenon.

When taken in the context of the anthropogenic degradation of Earth’s most organic materials, Eliasson’s work is inherently political. It is the very same set of paradigms that Eliasson deconstructs that have been driving forces behind the misuse and careless stewardship of our planet. For ages humanity has viewed nature as the ultimate prize, both because of the relationship between resources and growth of civilization and also the belief that the natural landscape is so spectacular and so vast that there is no conceivable way humans could have a serious impact on it. Few individuals in the nineteenth century thought spewing ash from coal production into the air was a problem, given the interminable greatness of our atmosphere, until numerous deaths occurred from air pollution in industrial cities such as London and New York. And it was only recently that the international community recognized the direct connection between emissions of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and destruction of the ozone layer.

In his installations, Eliasson engineers a direct human involvement with natural elements that transcends cultural models of the relationship between man and environment so that the individual, instead of simply observing and admiring, is now given the heightened responsibility of interacting with natural forces through art. Eliasson demonstrates that there is an apparatus behind the perceptive front that registers human action; nature is no longer something pristine and immeasurably vast but an evolving system in which man has a footprint.

In crafting these territories of perceptual phenomena, Eliasson draws directly from the philosophy of phenomenalism, especially as conveyed by the French scholar Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his Phenomenology of Perception. Merleau-Ponty offers a vision of the interaction between humans and
environment as a kind of visceral, immersive experience. Unlike rationalist philosophers who distinguished between man and nature, reflection (scientific reason), and the senses, Merleau-Ponty believed that, “Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them” (xi). The corporeal mechanisms of our bodies react to stimuli from our surroundings in an instantaneous exchange, so that we exist effortlessly as part of a system, unified in our mutual participation and reception.

These tenets are clearly expressed in Eliasson’s art and have the potential to animate a shift in the modern environmental movement. Environmentalism as catalyzed by figures such as John Muir and Rachel Carson was born from the concept of a more intimate and equal relationship between humans and nature. But more recently, eco-activist protests led by groups such as EarthFirst! and Greenpeace have begun to perpetuate a polarization between humans and nature through dramatic tactics aimed at media exposure. Rather than retreat to the line of rationalist division between human and natural forces, it is now essential that we find a set of tools and an effective medium for altering human perception of nature toward a worldview that will nurture ecological understanding. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenalism presents the tools, and modern ecological protest is the medium. Eliasson’s work is a kind of connecting force, illustrating how principles of phenomenology can be expressed clearly, spectacularly, and without over-analysis.

IMMERSIVE ART AS ENVIRONMENTAL PROTEST

The constantly evolving worlds of modern art and environmental protest may overlap through the practice of phenomenalism in a way that underscores the increasingly urgent message at the heart of human and natural welfare: we must act now to save our ailing planet. A paradox exists in the fact that Eliasson’s art itself cannot be labeled as eco-activist or explicitly ecological in origin, but it carries political weight through the implementation of phenomenological values that alter the cultural paradigms on nature that viewers bring to the exhibition. If Eliasson’s art has the ability to alter perception and undermine cultural paradigms without being transparently eco-conscious, it is necessary to consider the effect of art that is ecologically and politically driven, both in form and apparent message. While Eliasson successfully employs optical and sensory seduction of the audience to reflect a highly participatory and equity-based relationship with the environment, other artists are more blunt about the underlying environmental goals of their work.
The German artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser was a pioneer of environmentally conscious and charismatic architecture and painting in the twentieth century, essentially advertising unique elements of his environmental philosophy through his artwork. In designing the transformation of an old furniture factory into one of Vienna’s most exotic museums, Hundertwasser openly expressed his beliefs in the rights of nature. His architecture reflects his radical opposition to normative modes of living in the modern city, including a rejection of the straight line, the horizontal floor, and uniformly matched windows. From the outside the museum Kunsthauswein appears to be a mosaic of black and white tiles arranged in curved lines. Trees grow out of some of the building’s windows while the top of the building is literally a rooftop garden. Brightly colored pillars line the entrances to the museum and even the tiles of the pavement are curved in swirly patterns.

Hundertwasser believed that just as pores are the sources of air for the human skin, so must the walls of a building act as a “Third Skin” and be full of numerous windows. Similarly, his theory that trees should be a more integral part of the city landscape is exhibited in the rooftop garden and the small plots of dirt that allow trees to grow out of windows on every floor. According to Hundertwasser, “The tree tenant pays his rent in much more valuable currency than humans do” (Harel 2), and the trees in Kunsthauswein symbolize the rebirth of man’s rank as an important partner of the tree and nature itself. Instead of continually destroying the land, the building is a testament to Hundertwasser’s belief that “We must give territories back to nature which we have taken from her illegally” (Harel 3).

Inside the building the floors are uneven so that one can return to a more natural walking experience. The green roof serves both as an expression of a renewed relationship between the inhabitants and nature as well as a feature that serves to regulate the building’s climate during the winter and cool it during the summer, saving energy and expenses. The pillars are an important aesthetic addition because they give people “the good feeling of standing next to a tree” (Harel 5).

Hundertwasser’s work is similar to Eliasson’s in that it is immersive. Both
artists incorporate raw and natural materials to raise the issue of human interaction with environment. Major differences lie in the fact that while Hundertwasser bathes the audience in a manifesto of environmental ethics, Eliasson attempts no direct imposition of his beliefs, instead allowing the viewers to arrive at their own shifts in perception and ideology by their own paths and inward mechanisms. Though Hundertwasser’s work expresses relevant themes in our modern environmental crisis and has changed the outlooks of many different audiences over past decades, it is Eliasson’s art that is the most exciting in its construction of an ecologically cohesive bond between humans and nature. Both Hundertwasser and Eliasson have successfully bridged the gap between modern art and environmental activism, proving that art can act on multiple levels to catalyze greater ecological receptivity. But in a world obsessed with virtual reality and sensation, Eliasson’s installations have the greater potential to completely reinvigorate the way the world perceives the relationship between humans and the earth.

SPACE POLITICS

The claim that Eliasson communicates ecological consciousness is not valid, however, unless we consider the exact political properties of his work and analyze how the techniques he employs are in fact agents of social change. The aim is to investigate an important distinction between the political effects of Eliasson’s installations and the assertion that the art is meant or created to inspire sympathy for nature and our planet. There is danger in assuming a direct link between effect and purpose, and if Eliasson’s work is significant in its ability to alter perception of the relationship between man and nature, it would be seriously misleading to equate this effect with the art’s constructive goals. A paradox exists here. Taken in pure form, Eliasson’s artwork does not call for environmental change, nor is it a form of eco-activist protest. But it is inhabited by principles, namely those of phenomenalism, that enable it to have a political consequence, and in this way it alters how individuals view landscape, and by metonymic association the interaction between humans and environment.

The elegance of Eliasson’s work lies not only in its aesthetic appeal but also in its delegation of artistic construction and ultimate interpretation to the visitor. In many installations, Eliasson openly calls for an intimately engaged spectator with titles employing the possessive pronoun your as in Your natural denudation inverted (1999), Your egoless door (2005), and Your sun machine (1997). Eliasson’s work at its core demands that the visitor rec-
ognize his pieces as constructions and reacts to them by creating structures of his or her own invention. In a sense each visitor projects him or herself into the spatial canvas that Eliasson’s work occupies and is therefore cast in a principle role in the process of aesthetic production.

The political work that Eliasson’s art enacts is therefore presented as a task to the visitor. In his essay on the political portent of Eliasson’s work, the critic Mieke Bal concludes:

_This is why, in order to work politically, Eliasson’s art needs to stage a fictitious space for its experiences and experiments. Reluctant to espouse the discourse of political art as manifesto, this work is much more effective, aesthetically and thereby politically, because it does not pronounce upon the world, but considers how seeing it differently is already changing it (178)._  
Changing perception without explicitly “pronouncing” the nature or direction of this change is another expression of the work’s paradoxical qualities. Eliasson provides tools to the visitor, attending to people in time and space, and enabling liberation from traditional modes of perception and ingrained myths of our culture. The audience does not leave his work as a body changed in the same way, but altered almost imperceptibly in an infinite number of directions. To say that Eliasson’s artwork addresses a direct concern for the environment is unfounded, but to allow that the art is invested most clearly in the issue of environment, and to recognize the limitless number of possibilities of perceptual change that can be derived from the work, is to acknowledge that Eliasson’s pieces have the profound ability to inspire new visions of the exchange between humans and nature.

**BREAKING THE FRAME**

We have seen that Eliasson’s art works with a double edge, both providing the aesthetic environment for an infinite number of perceptual shifts and investing the viewer in the issue of landscape and nature. Here we shift from analyzing the art’s lack of ultimate political goals to consider the aspects of Eliasson’s art that do have the latent potential to inspire environmental change. These questions remain: exactly how does Eliasson employ natural elements to invent work so radically different from traditional nature-oriented art, and how does this have the effect of re-imagining the symbols of landscape in modern culture?

Works such as Eliasson’s _Notion Motion_ challenge traditionally constructed landscapes, both in the form of meticulously painted nature scenes characteristic of Dutch and Western artists and in the evolving philosophical
relationship between humans and the environment. *Notion Motion* presents the audience with an element commonly found in landscape painting and familiar to every viewer, but distorts it so that it becomes surreal, out of its natural plane and on a highly disturbing scale. In the installation *Moss Wall*, reindeer moss is anchored to a gallery wall with a framework of chicken wire, so that the surface appears to be a massive front of moss. The moss is disconcerting because instead of playing the role of a simple foreground or taking the shape of a doormat, it is now confrontational and imposing. It demands attention, even permeating the room with a distinct natural odor and slightly warming the temperature of the air. Though it immediately reminds the viewer of a natural scene, either painted or in nature itself, the moss is effectively denaturalized, now assuming a defiant personality so unlike its counterparts in real and constructed landscape.

The concept of landscape is closely tied with the history of changing perceptions of humanity’s place in the environment. Eliasson succeeds in undermining normative ways of representing nature in art, and in doing so invites questions concerning the philosophy behind the surviving paradigms of civilization and environment. Just as images of the pristine American frontier created in the nineteenth century represented the common belief in “Manifest Destiny,” Eliasson’s installations suggest a modern way of interpreting and understanding the presence of nature. At the heart of the new philosophy that Eliasson’s art applies to environment is human involvement, or a continual exchange of stimuli between subject and object. In *Notion Motion*, it is precisely human participation that animates the artwork and without the catalyzing forces of human presence, the work would exist as merely a lucid gray wall.

Eliasson often opens his exhibitions with *Room for One Color* (Grynztejn 6). The single wavelength yellow light produced by rows of bulbs running along the ceiling of a narrow room forces a reaction in the iris of each viewer, so that adjacent white rooms and hallways appear blue in relation to the yellow atmosphere. While experiencing the color yellow, we are also neurologically compensating for the
absence of other colors in the room. It is exactly the human sensory apparatus that is as much a part of the piece as the wires connecting the lightbulbs to an energy source. The essence of our experience is not explicitly given but a product of interweaving body and room, environmental qualities and our own internal sensations.

In analyzing the way that Eliasson delegates an active role to his audience, Daniel Birnbaum writes, “Olafur Eliasson’s art is not complete without you; in fact, you are part of it. His works are not self-sufficient objects in the usual sense; rather, they are environments—productive arrangements, heterogeneous apparatuses—awaiting your arrival” (131). This element of interaction is central to Eliasson’s work in that it also espouses phenomenological arguments that permeate the artist’s research and constructions. Installations such as Moss Wall, Room for One Color, and Notion Motion are all examples of “perceptual phenomena,” in which the viewer exchanges “bundles of sense-data” and stimuli directly with the works themselves. The installations, according to the tenets of phenomenalism, exist not as physical objects but more purely as the sensory reactions that humans perceive.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenalism is the force that animates Eliasson’s work so that viewers do not only emerge from the art with broadened concepts of light and space but are also shifted in numerous directions to question traditional tropes of landscape and nature. In essence, the tenets of phenomenalism provide the politicizing potential in Eliasson’s installations, loosening the frames through which the audience is accustomed to viewing environments. The experience is humbling; viewers are introduced into a “being in common” and absorb a sense of unity in the reception of sense data. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this sense of sharing experience: “The world is precisely that thing of which we form a representation, not as men or as empirical subjects, but in so far as we are all one light and participate in the One without destroying its unity” (xiii).

Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is continual and occurs without
our conscious awareness. In the following passage he discusses the emergence of sensations as qualities that are as complex as the objects themselves:

To see is to have colours or lights, to hear is to have sounds, to sense is to have qualities. To know what sense-experience is, then, is it not enough to have seen a red or to have heard an A? But red and green are not sensations, they are the sensed, and quality is not an element of consciousness, but a property of the object. Instead of providing a simple means of delimiting sensations, if we consider it in the experience itself which evinces it, the quality is as rich and mysterious as the object, or indeed the whole spectacle, perceived (5).

The body of sense data that we perceive is therefore a cumulative account of our environment as a perfect image of the world that requires no analysis. Our bodies sense colors, lights, sounds and space, all without the slightest turn of reflection, so that to perceive the world is to acknowledge the richness and value of every sensory experience.

In describing the consequences of a truly sensory, participatory relationship with an object, Merleau-Ponty states, “But the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were a God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception” (304). In playing the part of the viewer as sensory receptor, reacting to stimuli and projecting back onto the work, we become so much a part of the work itself that our perceptions of other, unrelated objects may change as well. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, our perceptions expand onto the “complete world,” demonstrating a consequence of the artistic experience: we are now altered perceivers and seers.

Eliasson comments on the possibilities of perceptual change inherent in his work in an interview with Robert Irwin: “To me the greatest potential of phenomenology lies in the idea that subjectivity is always susceptible to change. I like to think that my work can return criticality to the viewer as a tool for negotiating and reevaluating the environment—and that this can pave the way for a more causal relationship with our surroundings” (55). “Causal” is the operative word here. Eliasson suggests that his artwork has the power to remake our visions of reality. Often dwarfing viewers in the face of natural elements and creating a space of necessary exchange between audience and artwork, Eliasson offers to the viewer the concept that our relationship to nature should be one of mutual exchange, not over-dominance or disconnect.

Two additional key aspects of Eliasson’s work that make it so radically different from traditional landscape painting and western views of nature as
conquest are the inherently socializing conditions found in his installations and what Eliasson calls “seeing yourself seeing.” Viewing an installation such as *Notion Motion* involves not only participation of the individual, but also the individual’s awareness of the presence and effects of other people in the same atmosphere. In the darkened, liminal space of the room, facing the projected rippling surface, one feels transported into an equalizing atmosphere. Along with any other viewers who may be present, the individual is introduced into a realm of discovery. The actions of others are as much a part of the participatory experience as the viewer’s own, resulting in a mutual construction within the artwork, although no single viewer experiences the same stimuli as another. Individual reactions are preserved within a socializing environment.

“Seeing yourself seeing” is the process by which a viewer understands the nature of the apparatus that creates the given spectacle. Eliasson never attempts to conceal the framework behind his installations. In *Notion Motion*, the viewer can actively scrutinize the spotlight, the shallow pool and the moving wood that combine to create the projection on the scrim. The spectacle, instead of retaining a purely mythical presence, is exposed as a construction of wood, water, and light. The viewer simultaneously appreciates the fantastic effects of the piece while understanding the methods behind the sensation.

In an interview with Eliasson, the installation artist Robert Irwin stated, “I look around at the world, and it’s loaded with these kinds of frames. But, actually, there are no frames in our perception. It’s a continuous envelope in which we move. You realize that framing is a device” (56). While analyzing the use of limits and boundaries imposed on the average citizen by modern society, Irwin recognizes that Eliasson’s work has the potential to perceptually free the individual. While breaking the frame of the traditional landscape, Eliasson succeeds through the principles of phenomenalism to construct new visions of human interplay with nature. His tactics of creating a common ground while preserving the individual experience, and allowing the individual to literally see the process of spectacle, have the direct effect of altering perceptual pathways and the indirect consequence of disintegrating accepted modes of thought concerning man and nature. Each viewer is liberated, each has a new set of lenses through which to interact and appreciate natural elements.
The implications of Olafur Eliasson’s technique of applying phenomenalist tenets in artwork are vast. The environmental movement is at a critical point in history, and the welfare of the planet in many ways depends on the actions of those groups strong enough to attempt to incite change within ingrained environmental practices. Past decades of environmental demonstration have seen some major victories in favor of increased sustainability, but the radical and dramatic images of activists chained to trees are losing their shock value. In order to be the forerunners in mitigating the effects of climate change, leading environmental organizations will need to rethink their strategies and behave more deliberately. Because modern environmental protests too often result in the Faustian bargain of increased media exposure at the expense of polarizing the human/ nature relationship, it is vital for the health of our future Earth that these protests abandon the frame of the melodramatic and spectacle-hungry media, and instead engage the logic of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as a means to break the initial perceptive barriers to global sustainable action.

Within the sphere of modern environmental protest, many groups and organizations have transformed the act of demonstrating for a certain issue into the art of dramatic, ecological performance. Often such groups intentionally reduce the complexity of the environmental debate by employing clear and universally understood symbols of good and evil and purposely catering to a worldwide audience that laps up images of heightened drama and conflict. The unintended but devastating consequences of this strategy are twofold: not only is the environment set as a backdrop to human antics; the harmful paradigm of an abyss between nature and modern culture is also perpetuated. Among organizations that repeatedly use dramatic rhetorical tactics and cater to the global media to send their message, Greenpeace has been extremely influential.

During the spring of 1995, one-dozen Greenpeace activists occupied a decommissioned oilrig in the Brent Sea, 120 miles off the coast of the Shetland Isles. The rig had been under the operation of oil companies Shell and Esso until both determined that it was no longer useful and needed to be disposed of. Weighing the equivalent of 2000 double-decker buses, the Brent Spar...
was one of the largest masses of sheet metal stationed in the North Sea (Jordan 20). Shell made the controversial decision to tow the rig out onto the continental shelf and let it sink into the depths of the ocean.

The Greenpeace protest occurred in two periods of action. The first period lasted from April 30th to May 23rd and involved several protesters actually living on the Brent Spar, sending Internet reports to a Greenpeace support ship, the Moby Dick (Kershaw 7). The reports and photographs of the protest were forwarded to the international media. Pictures of lifeboats covered with rainbows and labeled Greenpeace seemingly battling the massive ships of the oil company sparked worldwide outrage aimed at Shell and its environmentally unsound practices. Greenpeace had successfully taken the conflict and transformed it into a kind of David-versus-Goliath epic battle.

The first period of action ended when Scottish courts gave Shell permission to evict the activists, and the oil company forcibly removed all people from the Brent Spar. Still, when Shell received support from a conservative British government and announced its plans to continue towing out the rig later in the spring, Greenpeace returned with a smaller but equally determined group of protesters. Shell used water cannons from its vessels to bombard the activists day after day, and finally began to tow the rig 330 miles out into the Atlantic with the environmentalists still on board. Finally, on June 20th, Shell collapsed under rising media condemnation and the tugboats turned around, bringing the rig and the exalting protesters back to shore.

The Brent Spar protest entered history as one of the first times an organization so successfully used methods of drama to gain media exposure and highlight an environmental issue. Nicholson-Lord wrote in 1997, “When the definitive history of environmentalism is written in the next century, the moment when a group of activists took over a pensioned-off oil platform in the North Sea may well merit a chapter all to itself...most people agree that, after the Brent Spar, nothing will be quite the same again. Ostensibly, Brent Spar was about the disposal of a huge amount of rubbish...but it was also a modern morality tale played out on our television screens and in the pages of our newspapers” (Jordan 21). The implications of Shell’s defeat extended not only to the company’s policy but also to the actions of other major oil companies. In an apology to customers, Shell stated, “We are going to change...it is not enough to conform to laws and international rules...Acceptance by society is needed too” (Jordan 21). Shell went on to announce a greenhouse gas emission reduction plan in 1998, and supported the Kyoto Protocol, all in an effort to be seen as environmentally conscious.

What danger then lies in the dramatic, performative tactics of Greenpeace’s eco-activist protest? The answer is found in the relationship
between the message-oriented strategy of the environmental organization and the appetite for sensationalism and drama in the modern media. While Greenpeace simplified the complex struggle for health of the world’s oceans into a cataclysmic battle between the rainbow warrior and the evil oil industry in order to more pointedly assure distribution of its message, the media effectively turned the North Sea into a film set, bringing the story to the forefront of international news more for its spectacle value than pressing content. Nature is presented as a backdrop to the action; humans are the center of attention. Even when the protest had been such a success, the idea that nature was the primary and only focus was lost in translation; thus by attaining and using tools of mass-exposure to raise awareness Greenpeace sacrifices some of its ecological goals. A paradox exists in that by utilizing rhetorical tactics to focus world attention on an environmental issue, Greenpeace ends up creating an anthropocentric theatre and widening the perceived gap between humans and nature.

In describing the interplay between a message and its dramatization, it is necessary to consider what also may be the consequence of Greenpeace’s use of symbols to communicate meaning and heighten awareness. We have seen that the parallels between the life boat vs. oil ship battle and exciting conflicts canonized in stories like that of David and Goliath fed media fascination with the event so that it was distorted, and the environment was forced into a minor role. In another way, the efforts made by Greenpeace to symbolically equate the friction between the oceans and the oil industry as that between good and evil worked to trivialize the terrifying complexity of the environmental issue at stake.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Zizek argues that the attempt to give meaning to a threatening and little understood event masks our innate fear of the impact of the event itself. Using the example of the ill-fated Titanic, he writes, “perhaps all the effort to articulate the metaphorical meaning of the Titanic is nothing but an attempt to escape this terrifying impact of the Thing, and attempt to domesticate the Thing by reducing it to its symbolic status, by providing it with meaning… the meaning obscures the terrifying impact of its presence” (1). Similarly, the photographs of the tiny Greenpeace dinghy facing the monstrous oil ship on the turbulent waters of the North Sea reduces the terrible uncertainty and complexity of the destruction of our oceans and the intricate relationships between interest groups like Shell, corporate capitalism, and the environment into a single dramatic metaphor. The rainbow warrior is good, the oil ship is evil, and nothing more is said in media releases about the impact that such a massive structure of steel could have had in polluting the seas. Nothing is communicated about
the seemingly endless battle of words between Shell and organizations such as Greenpeace that occurred long before the protest, in which Shell even agreed to conduct environmental impact reports on all scenarios involving the Brent Spar to avoid confrontation (Jordan 13). And still less was said regarding the political relationships between lobbyists on both sides of the conflict and the British government, a story that reveals hushed agreements and alliances.

The act of applying symbols to events and processes enables individuals to digest even the most intricate and deeply disturbing issues. Just as adding a metaphorical meaning to the sinking Titanic enabled individuals to rationalize the event more easily so that it assumed less of a threatening presence, the transformation of the Brent Spar conflict into a loaded allegory of good against evil weakened the urgency of the ecological issue at stake. In environmental protest, the danger lies in the fact that such a defense mechanism is detrimental to the understanding of the natural issue and the societal, political, and cultural events that surround it.

**MAN AND BEAST/MAN IN THE WORLD**

*For after the error of those who deny the existence of God…there is none that is more powerful in leading feeble minds astray from the straight path of virtue than the supposition that the soul of the brutes is of the same nature with our own; and consequently that after this life we have nothing to hope for or fear, more than flies and ants...*

—Rene Descartes

A still greater ramification of a protest like that on the Brent Spar is that it further supports a philosophical hierarchy between man and nature. In radically playing up human interaction and conflict, the protest demonstrates a deep disconnect between anthropogenic forces and natural forces. In this way, Greenpeace translates a kind of humanistic view of the natural world characteristic of the distinction between man and animal forms espoused by rationalist philosophers such as Descartes. Such philosophy is based on the widespread and historical belief that humans, as beings that according to Descartes differ from animals and plants through possession of a soul, are inherently superior and necessarily the dominant life form on Earth. Greenpeace, in its volatile rhetorical tactics aimed at exposure through human drama, is inadvertently perpetuating this rigid binary between human society and nature.

What is explicitly portrayed is a clear dichotomy between the dynamic of the actors on stage and the static, immobile stage set—in effect a kind of
anthropocentric monologue. In a world where it is now clear that what humanity demands has a direct and lasting impact on the Earth just as natural events daily affect human lives, it is necessary to show that instead of being separate and unique powers, human society and nature are part of a symbiotic system. These are the ideas that sparked modern environmentalism and motivated a generation of social activists under the leadership of visionaries such as John Muir to challenge society and politics for the sake of greater equity in the relationship between humans and nature. These are the ideas that we must re-ignite, but to do so we will need to approach environmentalism using a rhetorical method that has the ability to reconstruct mutualism between man and nature in an age of spectacle.

The elegance of phenomenalism lies in its ability to abolish the strict definitions of rationalistic tendencies in modern protest and its potential to revitalize the ideas that fueled the early stages of modern environmentalism. Merleau-Ponty explains how we can bind together our perception of the world with a sense of belonging and unity in all things:

> Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and a field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not ‘inhabit’ only ‘the inner man’ or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself. When I return to myself from an excursion into the realm of dogmatic common sense or of science, I find, not a source of intrinsic truth, but a subject destined to the world (xi–xii).

According to Merleau-Ponty, our instantaneous perception and receptivity to all things is the condition through which we become a more integral part of environment. Merleau-Ponty offers us this method of viewing the world and therefore the power to understand how we can exist in a participatory exchange of forces with nature. In this way phenomenalism supplies a new rhetoric in which we find shadows of the ideas that catalyzed environmentalism in the twentieth century, while rejecting formal rationalist constructions of man as separate from nature. Yet, unlike the pioneers of the environmental movement, our environmental leaders must face the challenge of the most pressing environmental threat in history: climate change. We have seen that the concepts of phenomenalism are presented and exhibited in modern art—why not expand this influence to environmentalism?
GREENPEACE ACTIVISM AS PHENOMENALIST PRACTICE

The future of the environmental movement lies in the readiness of groups such as Greenpeace to modify their methods and to present their ideas and messages attractively and palatably to an evolving public without employing simplifying, dramatic rhetorical devices that detract from the ecological ideas themselves. It is clear that an ever-increasing amount of spectacle is necessary to appeal to mass audiences, and it is not a viable option for Greenpeace to continually raise the stakes, searching out ever more inflammatory situations as catalysts for their messages. In order to change the views of a public eye that is ever harder to capture and hold, it is time for Greenpeace to consider breaking the “frames” that Irwin speaks of, refusing to let the media “focus” the issues and employing values of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenalism to reinvent the rhetoric of eco-activism.

The radical action characteristic of early Greenpeace protests was vital to awakening the world to environmental degradation, but the form of spectacle now needs to evolve in order to continue to have a positive effect. As the science of climate change continually presents irrefutable evidence that our planet is in crisis, it is ever more urgent that the international community begins to shift its ingrained behaviors. Change in behavior cannot occur without change in perception, and this is where phenomenalism enters the equation. Greenpeace is not a society of philosophers, and the abstract nature of the philosophical tenets I have discussed may seem unattainable or incomprehensible for an activist organization. Still, Eliasson shows us how phenomenalism can be expressed and used to utmost effect in tangible constructions of the simplest materials. Eliasson’s use of phenomenalist principles, such as exposing the framework behind each spectacle and creating a kind of “being in common” in viewers while retaining the individual role, are concepts that can be translated to public acts of protest. In some cases, the Faustian bargain may still be inevitable, but Greenpeace can change its rhetoric to reflect a new focus on dismantling the ecological issues from the frame and thus avoid the rationalist division of man and nature that past protests have sustained.

The most clear and direct way for Greenpeace to implement the tenet of “being in the world” espoused by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenalism is by acting as a leader in educating the public on ecological interdependence. Ecology, by definition, is the science of biological interdependency, and in this way can be directly correlated with Merleau-Ponty’s arguments on living in a unified world. It is known that the primary reason individuals become members of certain organizations is to receive information, and the most gratifying reward from acting as a member in the long run is a feeling of
increased awareness and knowledge on environmental issues. In order to communicate the idea that citizens of the world are participants in a greater ecological space, as unique and mobile parts of a greater whole, Greenpeace can teach a kind of receptive co-evolution as the standard for the relationship between humans and nature. More precisely, by educating the global audience on the interconnected nature of our biosphere, it may be possible to foster greater participation in environmental activism and spread the kind of ecological consciousness necessary to catalyze behavioral change.

One way for Greenpeace to reveal a framework or effectively relocate a demonstration away from its dramatic symbolism may be to utilize dynamic networks of communication in digital and computerized formats to allow open and democratic viewing of each protest. Just as CNN hosted a YouTube debate this year, where viewers across the globe could access the top presidential candidates on a more direct level than ever before, so Greenpeace can employ modern methods of dialogue to reveal behind-the-scenes work in every case of activism. In this way, although newspapers and televisions may still reveal the spectacle in the form of single, powerful images, the average global citizen will also have the ability to see the materials—the wood, water, and light—that exist behind the sensation.

In an interview with Robert Irwin, Olafur Eliasson commented, “This may sound naïve, but I think you can apply introspective and self-evaluative tools to any situation—and this ultimately gives you the opportunity to reposition yourself in society” (58). This concept can be applied to an organization, even an entire movement, just as effectively as it can be applied to an individual. The spheres of modern art and eco-activist protest have crossed in the past to the point where artwork has acted as a vessel for environmental philosophy, and demonstrations have been injected with drama and allegorical symbolism. Yet each of these techniques is no longer as potent as it was in recent decades. The next step in the interface between environmental protest and art may have potentially revolutionary effects if the more subtle but deliberate tools of phenomenalism are employed to alter perception in a less-polarizing yet equally spectacular form. This way, environmental organizations may succeed in teaching an understanding of our biosphere as a realm of common interdependence, where society and nature act in a balance of mutual exchange. As exemplified in Eliasson’s art, philosophy has provided the tools to break the frames of normative ways of seeing and perceiving, and ripples of change travel across disciplines. Now it is up to the leaders of environmental protest groups to use this gift that art has offered and apply it, for the ultimate purpose of healing our planet, to fundamentally “reposition” man’s perception of nature.
NOTES

1 I use the term “liminal” in the sense of a vulnerable, transitional state as described in Turner.

2 The parallel between Eliasson’s work and representations of Eden were introduced in Bal’s essay, “Light Politics.”

3 Hundertwasser often describes architecture through poetic references to nature, as in “The Third Skin in the Third District.”

4 “Perceptual Phenomena” and “Bundles of Sense Data” are two commonly used phrases in discussing phenomenalism, and are attributed to Edmund Husserl.

5 “Seeing yourself seeing” is a phrase unique to Eliasson’s descriptions of his work, as in his interview with Robert Irwin.

WORKS CITED


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