

Original Article



Eco-Aesthetics in Contemporary Western Landscapes: A Study of Nature and Art

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Abstract:

Mountains and water are fundamental landscapes with abundant artistic appeal in nature. A large part of the elements of landscape representation consists of natural scenes that evoke a sense of grandeur and awe in the artist. Mountains, land, water, and sky are considered natural elements that have engaged the minds of Western artists for centuries. The way these natural elements are represented has been part of the mental challenge for every artist. The representation of this magnificent nature can be seen as a kind of aesthetic competition. It seems that the artist recreates nature in an artificial form and frame of handmade creation. In fact, Western landscape paintings depict natural sceneries and landscapes of the Western world. These paintings showcase the beauty and grandeur of open spaces, focusing on unique features such as mountains, forests, and vast skies. Landscape painting has a long history dating back to the 15th century and remains popular among artists and collectors. The aim of the present research is to recognize the ecological elements in contemporary Western nature painting. Accordingly, using a descriptive-analytical method, an effort has been made to study the ways of recreating environmental elements in the works of five Western landscape painters (Mark Lombardi, Jill O'Bryan, Robin O'Neil, El Daniel, and Sarah K. Smith). The research findings indicate that, unlike the landscape paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries in the West, contemporary Western landscape painting has taken an entirely different path. Unlike previous landscape paintings, which attempted to represent nature through a subjective approach, contemporary Western painters strive to transform their artworks into a platform for the recreation of nature. Furthermore, artists in this period view ecological concerns as a vital matter rather than an artistic pastime due to the adverse consequences of industrialization on nature.

Keywords: Nature, Ecology, Environmental Art, Landscape Architecture, Contemporary Western Painting.

Introduction

Art, due to its extensive capabilities, can have numerous sociological functions. This issue is often overlooked by policymakers and social agents. Through the endeavors of governments, research and practice have been able to illuminate the realms of art and the utilization of power. The manifestation of various global challenges,

particularly environmental pollution, corroborates this assertion. Therefore, the use of art in addressing environmental dilemmas is an extraordinary mission for activists in this field, and officials in various countries should pay special attention to this matter. With the onset of the industrial revolution and the introduction of

tools into human life, artists began to employ various materials to create their works. Artistic expression gained considerable freedom, allowing artists to engage in a variety of actions and behaviors. In this context, the domain of art has embraced self-regulation, and everyday objects, even waste, have become some of the most significant artistic tools (Daneshgar & Sanji, 2018).

Accordingly, the intellectual and practical efforts of thinkers and scholars have undoubtedly brought attention to the impact of various social challenges, such as soil, water, and air pollution, as well as broader environmental issues (Fathi et al., 2025). These concerns are increasingly being addressed through the development of appropriate strategies, engaging governments and local communities in collaborative problem-solving processes. In this context, sociological studies on the creativity of artists have provided promising perspectives on harnessing this potential. For instance, Ghorashi, Azkia, and Mahdavi (2015) emphasize the importance of understanding community perspectives, as demonstrated in their phenomenological study of the Kan neighborhood in Tehran, which highlights the role of local insights in addressing social and environmental challenges. Contemporary art, while often striving to capitalize on new opportunities, has frequently neglected pressing social, political, and cultural issues. The ways to realize social existence and art remain one of the most significant concerns of modern art, environmental discourse, and related fields (Samavi, 2018). This highlights the necessity for a more integrated approach that connects artistic innovation with community-driven solutions to environmental and social challenges. Such an approach aligns with the findings of Gowhareh and Taheri Tafti (2022), who emphasize the importance of understanding multiscale mechanisms in addressing urban shrinkage and population decline in small-size cities, as seen in their study of Kermanshah Province. Their work demonstrates how localized and context-specific analyses can inform broader strategies for addressing complex socio-economic and environmental issues, offering valuable insights for integrating artistic and community-based practices into sustainable urban development. Similarly, Ghandeharion and Feyz (2014) highlight the role of art in addressing

societal issues, as seen in their analysis of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, where they explore the intersection of gender, power, and societal norms. This interdisciplinary approach underscores the potential of art to reflect and address pressing social and environmental challenges, bridging the gap between creative expression and practical solutions.

In this context, conceptual art plays a significant role in addressing this issue. Conceptual art is a human activity that is related to an individual's aesthetic sensibility. Artistic works can be effectively utilized to prevent pollution. It can be argued that depicting environmental pollution in artistic works, highlighting the dangers of pollution, and generating public concern through artistic expression are among the mentioned possibilities. In particular, in contemporary Western painting, attention to environmental issues and the ecological imperatives of today's world has become increasingly important. Therefore, harmonizing global perspectives on environmental pollution, as well as stabilizing advanced efforts to prevent soil and water pollution, are crucial consequences of utilizing art in the process of preventing environmental pollution. One of the most significant and effective strategies for addressing natural challenges is artistic action (Fattahi, 2019). In this context, it is essential to understand that, in the presence of serious issues such as environmental pollution and suitable and effective methods of artistic activity, it is possible to identify appropriate management strategies and their implementation depending on the number and type of audiences, which may either contribute to or hinder the betterment of our world.

This research aims to evaluate some of the characteristics of contemporary art in the reimagining of the environment and the related challenges, with a focus on specific works by contemporary Western nature painters. The central question of this study is: What are the most significant ecological elements of contemporary Western environmental art?

Research Methodology

The present research methodology is descriptive-analytical with an ecological approach. The data collection method for this study is library-based. The tools for gathering data include note-taking

and observing artistic works. The data analysis method in this research is qualitative.

Sample Volume and Statistical Population

Among contemporary Western nature painters, the works of five contemporary artists—Mark Lombardi, Jill O'Bryan, Robyn O'Neil, El Daniel, and Sarah K. Smith—are highlighted, and an effort is made to examine the ecological elements of these works in comparison to earlier artworks.

Theoretical Foundations of the Research

• Environmental Art

The terms "environmental art" and "ecological art" are used interchangeably by some artists and researchers. They define artistic ideas that celebrate the beauty of nature and believe that environmental art engages with and contemplates the environment, addressing environmental problems and issues. Environmental art draws significant attention from the connection between the artist and their surrounding nature. By understanding nature and the genuine connections that humans have with it, the artist can redefine new perspectives of the environment and its challenges as an artistic act (Monjazi, R, 2021). In defining environmental art, various discussions have been employed. Reza Ghale, citing the Turner Dictionary of Art, describes environmental art as a form of art that encompasses a number of visually diverse aspects, causing the object to expand in a way that extends beyond its surrounding space. With this concept, visitors can enter the exhibition space of paintings or sculptures and their surroundings, thereby becoming a part of the artwork itself through their interaction with the creation (Ghale, R, 2010). In the Oxford Dictionary, environmental art is a form of art in which artists create three-dimensional spaces that engage the audience through various sensory experiences, including visual, auditory, tactile, and even olfactory stimuli that are exciting and provocative. Some artists in the past have been accustomed to working on canvas; however, coexistence with our surrounding environment is at our disposal, and the term consists of two words: art and environment, which evoke numerous meanings in the mind. Generally, environmental art can be utilized to express opinions and convey statements. In fact, the environment is the most reliable avenue for

communicating with humanity. According to Oxford's definition, not only does environmental art encompass the relationship between nature and art, but humanity also plays a central role in this context. Environmental artists have a direct impact on nature: they engage in living, experiencing, and interacting with the environment, rather than merely intending to display it. Consequently, the genuine interest of these individuals lies not only in the final product but also in the artistic creation process. Their aim is to work with the natural environment, conceptual imagery, their own bodies, and personal experiences, achieving an intrinsic understanding of life and existence. This broader perspective has replaced the traditional focus on art and visual displays (Smagula, H, 1989).

In a general statement, the characteristics of environmental art can be briefly described as follows:

The absence of a permanent piece and its ephemeral nature as a natural phenomenon

The definition of the artwork in a specific location

The harmony of the artwork with the environment in which it is created across various fields of science (Mohammadian, A, 2015).

In other words, the distinction of this art from other forms lies in its mode of presentation. Environmental art is directly accessible to the audience, engages the viewer, and provides an opportunity to reconnect humanity with nature, which is interpreted in various ways, such as "art in the service of nature," "the movement of art toward nature," and "a remedy for re-establishing the human spirit's connection with nature (Sami'azar, A, 2017). This art often involves collaboration with scientists, researchers, or public figures, whose participation influences the creation of styles and the final product (Monjazi, R, 2021). From a broader perspective, considering the foundation laid by Smagula, environmental art encompasses all forms of life art. In his view, the term environmental art, as a new branch and tendency, serves as a comprehensive lexicon that encompasses all contemporary activities related to nature and the environment and its trends, such as global art and art in nature. After defining environmental art, he refers to the general limitations of what is common in all types of environmental art, citing the stimulation of

thought, the transmission of ideas, and providing something for viewers to contemplate regarding the environment as the most crucial aspect of environmental art (Smagula, 1989).

In general, environmental art is approached from two perspectives: aesthetic and environmental, both of which relate to the primary motivation for artistic creation in environmental art (Ghale, R, 2010). In classifying these artworks, the categorization and naming of them should come to a halt at some point, and we must at least acknowledge that most of these tendencies overlap, allowing a single artist's work to fall under at least two classifications (Monjazi, 2021). Furthermore, there have been various interpretations of this art since the early emergence of the concept of environmental art up to the present day. Due to the diversity and quantity of works, classifying and observing environmental artworks within a single framework is challenging. This arises from the form and content, which stems from what we recognize as modern art, making it very difficult to draw a clear line between environment-related art; some even argue that such delineation is meaningless. As a result, many artists and critics adopt suitable terminology while acknowledging that these classifications are subject to change and can be referred to in various ways.

- **Ecological Art**

Ecological art is often regarded as a subset of environmental art. In the Ruyin Pakbaz Encyclopedia, it is defined as a term to describe art that emphasizes processes occurring in nature, having first appeared in 1968 (Pāk̄bāz, 2010). Seyed Abolqasem Sadr in his Painting Encyclopedia defines ecological art as a term used to describe artworks created as a thoughtful response by artists to the natural environment, as well as to the interaction of human society with that environment, and ecological art is remarkable (Seyyed Abolqasem, 2009).

Ecological art has many aspects that are influenced by nature. The roots of environmental themes began after World War II, when American commerce experienced unprecedented growth. Theoretical efforts to emphasize the role of the earth and its resources after World War II later led to new knowledge about ecology (Becket and

Gifford, 2007). Among the extensive social developments of that decade, the 1960s witnessed significant practical abuses that were immediately protested everywhere, later revived by the environmental movement as a belief, which first emerged in a call marked "Earth Day" on April 22. Earth Day prompted people to think more about environmental conservation and ignited their interest in environmental protection as a global movement. The political national movement was established in the midst of this.

The term "ecological art" is sensitive to environmental conservation issues and often involves collaboration between the artist and others, as well as the art itself. Recycling and the regeneration of the environment and nature are among the most popular methods in this field (Mohammadian and Sharifzadeh, 2014). Environmental art, with its profound impact and unique approach to fostering a closer relationship with nature, typically utilizes more elements from nature and, in fact, reiterates the need for the bond and intimacy between humans and nature. Environmental art recreates various components of nature using artistic and aesthetic methods and media. Ecological or eco-art is not necessarily beautiful; it may even be wholly indifferent to beauty, and since the goal of this art is not to influence the general audience regarding environmental issues, it may consequently face challenges in terms of public reception. Essentially, the aim of this art is not merely to formalize a subject; rather, due to its foundation on culture and interaction, its purpose aligns with a cultural perspective that has ecological and human implications (Jahangi and Emami Far, 2017).

Fundamentally, eco-art is a modern form of art that emerged in response to global environmental issues. In this genre, the importance of the appropriate use of natural resources and the human impact on climate and land is emphasized more than in any other art form. Thus, the use of environmental art aims to strengthen the connection between art, culture, and environmental sustainability (Monjazi, 2021). In a general summary, the principles of ecological art

include: reconnecting and re-engaging with nature, creating new ways of coexisting with the environment, establishing connections between art and natural forces such as water, soil, sky, wind, and even earthquakes that can create artworks. Addressing environmental issues, restoring and revitalizing damaged natural environments, and finding solutions alongside offering creative approaches for coexistence are among the fundamental principles of ecological art.

A significant point to consider here is that environmental artists do not solely focus on representation; they pay special attention to issues such as immortality. They have chosen immortality and life, appreciating the experience and interaction between nature and humanity, which is a quest for self-discovery and the origin of existence for every individual that truly stems from nature. The implementation of collaborative projects in the field of environmental art has contributed to the creation of lasting works of art, with the goal of increasing awareness and protecting nature through a sustainable approach. The use of environmental and artistic resources is crucial in this regard.

Results

Elements of Ecological Perspectives in Classical Western Artists

Contemporary landscape painting has increasingly marginalized its compositional structure and aesthetic foundations, which were once central to studio culture. Historical design, characterized by its integrated spatial arrangements, is being progressively abandoned in favor of open-ended processes and developments that are only loosely regulated by management practices. Indeed, it can be argued that in classical landscape painting, the artist perceived the natural world as a cohesive and interconnected entity, whereas contemporary art often lacks the concept of nature as an organic and systemic whole. This shift reflects broader trends in spatial and environmental analysis, as seen in studies like those by Mansourihanis et al. (2024), who integrate geospatial intelligence and spatio-temporal modeling to monitor tourism-

related carbon emissions, and Zarei et al. (2024), who employ fuzzy cognitive mapping to analyze spatial structure variability in urban contexts. These methodologies highlight the importance of systemic approaches in understanding complex spatial and environmental dynamics, a perspective that seems increasingly absent in contemporary artistic practices. Similarly, Asmaroud, Khadijeh, and Alaei (2015) emphasize the dual nature of development in educational contexts, particularly in talented schools, where opportunities for growth must be carefully balanced against potential harms. Their insights into the challenges of fostering talent while mitigating risks resonate with the broader need for balanced and sustainable approaches in both art and education.

In addition, unlike the landscape designers of the Humboldt era, who were primarily gardeners and often tended to the same locations for years or even decades, contemporary designers typically work in urban offices, far removed from the sites they influence. Not only are their daily activities fundamentally different from those of their predecessors, but their workflow and professional vocabulary increasingly mirror the administrative culture of non-design fields. Today's studio culture produces managers equipped with skills such as map analysis, data visualization, and scenario building, rather than fostering traditional artistic sensibilities. In an educational environment deeply shaped by administrative practices and viewing habits, it is difficult to identify where a poetic or creative act might emerge. The physics of Humboldt's tableaux, however, offers a potential pathway for reconfiguring this contemporary dilemma. While it relies on similar practices of collecting, tabulating, and visualizing precisely measured data, it operates within a semiotic framework driven by sensation and governed by aesthetics. This approach aligns with modern efforts to enhance inclusivity and engagement in design practices, as highlighted by Entezarizarch, Paquet, and Maisel (2024), who demonstrate how remote focus groups can improve inclusive design practices by incorporating diverse perspectives into the creative process. Their work underscores

the importance of bridging traditional aesthetic principles with contemporary methodologies to address the evolving challenges of design in a globalized world.

Although landscape painting has its roots in antiquity, it gained significant popularity among early modern artists. Many of these artists, driven in part by their disillusionment with urban modernity, sought out locations reminiscent of untouched earthly paradises where they could immerse themselves in their work and observe nature intimately. These settings inspired radical artistic experiments, often fueled by the visual and cultural stimuli of urban life. However, as they embraced nature and rural communities, they began to challenge traditional conventions of landscape painting, employing unnatural colors or innovative brushwork techniques that emphasized their artistic process (Shannon and Smets, 2010). This shift reflects a broader tension between urban and rural influences, a theme that resonates with contemporary studies such as Bevilacqua and Sohrabi (2020), who explore networking analysis in urban contexts as a tool for managing urban transitions. Their work underscores the dynamic interplay between urban complexity and the search for simplicity, a duality that continues to shape artistic and spatial practices.

Furthermore, two significant innovations made painting from nature more accessible and convenient for artists than ever before. Improved transportation systems, such as railroads and automobiles, enabled people to travel more quickly and efficiently to remote or inspiring locations. Additionally, the invention of paint in tubes, which remained moist and were easily portable, liberated artists from the laborious tasks of mixing and storing their paints. This breakthrough allowed them to work freely in outdoor environments, fostering a deeper connection with nature and expanding the possibilities for artistic expression. This

revolutionary shift parallels the transformative role of individual investors in urban change, as highlighted by Rezaei and Gholami Gowhareh (2021) in their study of the historic district of Kashan, Iran, where individual initiatives have driven the preservation and revitalization of cultural heritage. Just as portable paints empowered artists to explore new creative horizons, individual investors have played a pivotal role in reshaping urban landscapes, demonstrating the profound impact of innovation and individual agency in both art and urban development.

On the other hand, before the emergence of earth art and the inclination of artists towards the industrial and modern world, along with the representation of its devastating effects on nature, a group of artists known under the name of the earth art movement was able to emphasize the importance of environmental issues in their works even more. These artists created landscape artworks that were predominantly related to mining and its associated industries. For instance, the experiences of figures like Robert Smithson in slate mining paved the way for a relatively widespread representation of the impacts of human activities on the natural world. However, this type of representation of human-altered nature garnered significant criticism. Critics regarded the works of artists such as Smithson and Heiser as distant from the traditional landscape painting and the aesthetic appeal of this art form. The depiction of stones piled in a mine or their transportation to a desert is not perceived as a landscape; rather, it is considered a form of anti-landscape (Andrews, 1999).

By examining several works by 19th-century artists, one can highlight the important distinctions between the landscape painters of the 19th century and their contemporary counterparts. The first painting titled "Where the Clouds Love to Rest" by Alfred Jacob Miller, in fact, reflects his experiences from the western United States (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Where Clouds Like to Rest, Alfred Jacob Miller

This work presents a landscape of the American West, exemplifying another prominent piece from this era that effectively showcases important themes in landscape painting, namely the subject of the landscape, the expanse of space, place-based specificity, and an objective approach to natural elements. The painting "Sunset on the

New England Shore" by Robert Duncanson is a masterful composition of natural elements that culminates in a beautiful sunset. Duncanson's work, due to its adherence to a natural subject and its depiction within a stunning vista, is considered one of the most ideal pieces in the realm of landscape painting (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Sunset on the Shores of New England, Robert Duncanson (Source: DailyArt, 2021)

The Relationship between Science and Landscape in Contemporary Art

The concept of landscape evolves in tandem with the development of social history and human knowledge. Historically, the concept of landscape entered geographic analysis thanks to Alexander von Humboldt. In the second volume of his work "Cosmos," published in Berlin in 1847, just one year before the movements that would bring the bourgeoisie to power in Germany, he traces the story of models that have historically dominated

worldviews. The overall reconstruction of humanity revolves around the strategic value inherent in the landscape model. Humboldt's true aim was to steer the German bourgeoisie away from their "empty poetic games," as Franz Mehring later puts it, in order to provide them with knowledge that would ensure control over the world through scientific understanding. The field in which the project of the substandard materializes is that which constitutes the entire public realm of the bourgeoisie. Humboldt opted

for a cultural revolution rather than a political one, and this was precisely linked to the concept of landscape and its structural leap from aesthetic to scientific function. This leap was one that, with the advent of artistic imagery, rendered the image of nature comprehensible solely to the bourgeoisie. In fact, it was essential for bourgeois culture to transform from its aesthetic matrix into a shift in visual knowledge, which culture had been confining itself to, toward the natural sciences—a transformation aligned with dominion rather than mere representation. Landscape, as a visual representation, was, according to Humboldt's strategy, the tool for this metamorphosis.

In this context, Humboldt's aesthetic approach to science and Goethe's views on the relationship between science and art, as well as Ernst Haeckel's thoughts and work, were clarified after his years of study. Humboldt wrote that "a common link [...] flows through all living nature." According to him, the task of the natural scientist was to describe the unified whole while also considering the aesthetic characteristics of nature. Ernst Haeckel, who was a talented artist, went even further in combining science and art than Humboldt. His journeys and immersion in the beauties of nature accompanied him throughout his scientific career. Like Humboldt and Goethe, he regarded everything as part of a single whole. He intertwined descriptive biology, the theory of evolution including its philosophical implications, along with the pleasures of nature and art. In his seminal work in 1866, he developed a comprehensive new system of sciences. He noted that pure descriptive biology was no longer justifiable and that its primary duty now lay in the realm of explanation. This led him to assert that all true philosophy is science, and all true science is philosophy.

He developed his monistic and holistic perspective, adopting a central unifying principle of evolution. One of the primary dualistic views he contested was the separation of mind and matter (or body and mind). With Darwin and Wallace's recognition of natural selection as the primary driver of evolution, Haeckel had a

materialistic scientific foundation that he employed as a tool against any force that opposed scientific truth. Darwin stated that Haeckel was one of the few individuals who clearly understood natural selection. This indicates that Haeckel had a good grasp of the relationship between the environment and adaptation. Living organisms engage in a vast network of connections to both inorganic and organic environments. The effective environment against which living organisms are selected consists not only of a set of mineral conditions but predominantly of a network of living entities.

During his travels, he painted thousands of watercolor landscapes and provided detailed reports of his journeys. Haeckel rarely described landscapes shaped by agriculture; instead, he preferred untouched territories such as tropical forests. The individuals he included in his compositions were clearly used to highlight a motif he had before him, often emphasizing that humans are part of nature. In his book "Coral Reefs of Arabia" (1876), he described and painted underwater landscapes, specifically the coral gardens of the Red Sea, but soon turned to evolutionary themes that depicted the struggle for survival in this extraordinarily beautiful environment. He never separated the joy of nature from science or the two from art. His "Art Forms in Nature" (Kunstformen der Natur, 1899-1904) showcased individual examples, with the exception of one plate. However, one year after completing "Kunstformen," he published his "Wanderbilder," which included forty paintings of tropical regions.

He was well aware that the beauties he depicted were under threat. In early 1854, he wrote to his parents about the devastation of forests that rendered the land uninhabitable for all time, and such an intervention creates a drastically different climate. In summary, for Haeckel, the electronic environment serves as a context for evolutionary adaptation, mutual interactions that he described as "ecological," and has a close relationship with the distribution of organisms (Haeckel's ecology), and nature, as he enjoyed it, was deeply intertwined. Essentially, when he depicted

landscapes in his paintings and described them in a holistic language, he not only built a bridge for environmental art but also incorporated art into science and his unifying worldview.

The Ecological Elements of Contemporary Western Artists

In Western art, prior to the Renaissance, we encounter a relatively lesser significant movement than that of the later period. The Renaissance brought about a real advancement with a new system of graphical perspective. This allowed for expansive views to be convincingly portrayed, evolving naturally from the foreground to the distant view. The word "perspective" is derived from the Latin word "perspicere," which means

"to see through." The application of perspective stems from mathematics. However, despite artists having learned to present exemplary panoramas at intermediate and distant ranges, until the nineteenth century, landscape painting occupied a lowly position in the established hierarchy of genres in Western art. Nevertheless, narrative painting—often depicting stories from the Bible or mythology—was highly esteemed. For several centuries, Italian and French artists would simply convert landscape paintings into historical paintings by adding figures to create a narrative scene. In England, landscapes primarily served as backgrounds for portraits, showcasing parks or estates of landowners (Mohd Yunos et al, 2015) (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Camille Corot (French), Hagar in the Desert, 1835
(Source: Metropolitan Museum website, New York)

On the other hand, in the Netherlands, pure landscape painting was accepted more rapidly, primarily due to the denial of religious painting in the Calvinist society. Many Dutch artists of the seventeenth century specialized in landscape painting and developed subtle and precise techniques to realistically depict light

and weather. During this period, specific types of scenes appeared in the catalogs of this era, including "moonlit" scenes, "meadows," "farms," and "villages." Most Dutch landscapes were relatively small: smaller paintings for smaller homes (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Moonlit Landscape with Bridge, c. 1650, Van der Neer
(Source: Dailyart.com)

In fact, this genre was so embraced in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands that landscape artists were referred to by the Dutch Golden Age painter and theorist, Samuel van Hoogstraten, as the "common footpaths in the army of art." Subsequently, in the 18th and 19th centuries, religious painting saw a decline throughout Europe. This reality, along with the new Romanticism—which emphasized emotions, individualism, and the glorification of nature—

elevated landscapes to a fixed position within the hierarchy of genres. In the early nineteenth century in the United States, Hudson River School painters, influenced by Romanticism and the spirit of exploration, depicted the natural beauties of the new country from the Hudson River Valley and other eastern regions. They documented—the expansive wilderness of America, which was rapidly disappearing—and often idealized it (Figure 5).



Figure 5: John Frederick Kensett, Mount Washington, 1869
(Source: Wellesley College Museum website)

In the meantime, French painters at the Barbizon School established a tradition of landscape painting that was the most influential tradition in Europe for a century. In the late 1860s, a younger generation was influenced by the Barbizon painters. By taking landscape painting a step further, Impressionism was born. Impressionists often painted en plein air, introducing radical

stylistic innovations for the first time in a very long time. While they also painted still lifes, portraits, street scenes, and interiors, Impressionistic landscapes firmly established this genre as one of the most popular genres in art – both then and now (de Lima et al 2016).

It can be said that the representation of nature and its ecological elements is impossible without

creativity. It is the restless and inquisitive spirit of the artist that is capable of giving nature a different color and form. For example, when we examine the works of Van Gogh, we see something beyond the blue sky, golden fields, and vibrant morning flowers. Undoubtedly, in Van Gogh's works, there is a new form of nature that has only one name: the representation of nature from the perspective and view of humans as subjects. In painting, nature becomes an object for study; thus, each artist reflects their own approach to nature. Many believe that nature in contemporary Western painting owes its form to a pure expression that allows artists to convey their thoughts in various ways. Certainly, form is an indispensable component of expressing nature in its artistic shape, but form without the creative mindset and subjective spirit of the artist is an unfulfilled and overlooked possibility. Therefore, in the process of representing nature, we observe a pure creativity that strives to depict nature within the framework of the artist's mentality.

This form of nature representation became obsessively unfinished among artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the West. However, in the twentieth century, a new form of landscape art emerged in which the artist primarily sought to transcend the subject-object relationship and become one with the natural world. In fact, although modern art was initially founded on the Cartesian dualism of body and soul or subject and object, there were painters who no longer confined themselves within the rigid forms and shapes of modernity. Instead, with a transcendent creativity, they endeavored to make painting a stage for representing two matters: first, the perception of nature as a unique universe, and second, the relinquishment of viewing nature as an objective element. This perspective contrasted with the views of many twentieth-century philosophers who, upon encountering the complexities of perception, added to the subjective realm of understanding nature.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenological philosopher, it was modern art that demonstrated how complex perception is as a sensory act. He believed that Renaissance art,

although it sought to unveil the mystery of the emergence of objects for us and, in Descartes' terms, to enrich and complete its paintings through free experiences and by presenting and displaying existence, ultimately fell short. As Merleau-Ponty stated, the only reason their technique came to be perceived as flawed was that they mistakenly believed, with scientific certainty, that they had brought the ultimate conclusion to the tumultuous history of painting with their linear perspective technique. In contrast, modern art reveals how intricately our perception of the world can function, showcasing how objects can appear before our eyes in an enchanting, magical, and astonishing manner. It is therefore clear that painting is related to the world in which I exist, that is, to being (Merleau-Ponty, 2018).

According to Merleau-Ponty, a painter can reveal a truth of the world through the oriented relationships on their canvas, a truth that they have experienced with their whole being and that is filled with meaning for them. This truth is dependent on the position and perspective of the painter and occurs at the very moment of observation. What the painter captures on the canvas is a transient truth that can be perceived from a specific viewpoint and has the ability to communicate with the viewer. Therefore, in painting, subject and object intertwine, and the artwork reveals a meaning to us that is rooted in the life of the painter and serves as their window to the world. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of the personal and social life of the artist, which can illuminate the hidden aspects of their works (Sabzkahr, 2017). He considers Cézanne an excellent example of a painter who attempted to change the painterly relationship with objects. Cézanne did not paint objects and nature around him in a traditional way; rather, he sought to depict the phenomena of the object as they present themselves, or in other words, the phenomenological appearance of the object. Merleau-Ponty believes that painting is not merely an imitation of the world but is the world itself. (Matthews, 2014).

Merleau-Ponty, in his interpretation of Cézanne's works, refers to the central theme of the

representation of objects in these works. The Impressionists aimed to depict light, color, and objects in a way that our eyes perceive them, without a fixed environment and in a fleeting moment. Cézanne also seeks to express this ephemeral moment through objects, rather than through a non-figurative world, as some Impressionists and Surrealists did. According to Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, Cézanne aims to depict objects as they take shape through their material powers and manifest to us with their inherent cohesions (Merleau-Ponty, 2018).

He emphasizes that in modern art, we encounter a multitude of strange and often disparate shapes and colors that show no representation of the external world; however, like music, they are still sensibly perceptible to others (Sabzkahr, 2017). According to Merleau-Ponty, an artist like Cézanne effectively illustrates that painting is a living and vital organism, not a mere imitation of the real world or a lesser imitation of the world of ideas, as was prevalent in Plato's philosophy. In Merleau-Ponty's view, Cézanne acknowledges the necessity of such a living and dynamic organism by placing the solidity and hardness of existence on one side and its diversity and variability on the other... and hopes to create a new description of the object through this division (Nabii, 2006). This description itself becomes the beginning of a new form of life.

With this description of the modern art approach to the subject of nature and the type of representation in painting, we can effectively uncover the recent decades' artists' perspectives on landscape art. In this section, five artists will be studied. These artists are: Mark Lombardi, Jill O'Bryan, Robyn O'Neil, El Daniel, and Sarah K. Smith.

Among the Western landscape artists who not only did not have a dual approach to the nature of nature but also defined painting as an art aligned with ecological goals, was Mark Lombardi. Lombardi is a conceptual and abstract artist from the United States who, using network-like maps, documented considerable information about nature in his works. He was born in 1951 in Syracuse. In 1974, he received his bachelor's

degree in art history. After graduating, he moved to Texas, where he first worked as an assistant curator, art librarian, assistant director of a gallery, and ultimately as the owner and operator of Square One Gallery and Lombardi Gallery. As a neo-conceptual artist, Mark Lombardi has consistently emphasized the connection between art and information. His works are often based on the analysis of data and patterns, and for this reason, he is recognized as an important voice in contemporary art and new technologies. In addition to creating artworks, he has also engaged in research and education in the field of art history and has spoken at several international conferences and seminars.

Lombardi has also been active in collaborative projects with other artists and researchers, striving to expand the boundaries of contemporary art through these efforts. The intricate maps and interactions among data in his works prompt the viewer to reflect on the nature of information and how it is recorded and transmitted. Throughout his professional life, Lombardi has established and managed various galleries, where he has been able to promote the works of emerging and established artists. His galleries have become a sanctuary for artists and art enthusiasts, exerting influence in the art world for two decades. With a critical approach to traditional representations of art, he challenges outdated concepts and offers new perspectives. This approach has made his works not only visually engaging but also tools for deeper discussions and contemplations in social and cultural contexts (Landi, 2004).

Moreover, Lombardi has been actively involved in collaborative projects with other artists and researchers, striving to expand the boundaries of contemporary art. The complex maps and interactions among data in his works prompt the viewer to reflect on the nature of information and how it is recorded and transmitted. Throughout his professional life, he has established and managed various galleries, where he has promoted the works of emerging and prominent artists. His galleries have become a sanctuary for artists and art enthusiasts, making a significant impact in the art world for two decades. Lombardi adopts a

critical approach to traditional representations of art, challenging outdated concepts and offering new perspectives. This approach has made his works not only visually appealing but also tools for deeper and more thought-provoking discussions in social and cultural contexts (Peters, 2000).

Lombardi, in terms of the representation of nature, considers himself indebted to earlier landscape artists. According to Lombardi, the human conception of place requires correction, or perhaps a complete revision, and his work clarifies the reality that place insists on its own placeness. While the depiction of place and space is certainly not objective, labeling it as subjective can potentially be misleading. It should not be

forgotten that an artist like Lombardi does not fit within the narrow and rigid frameworks of the object-subject dichotomy. Lombardi's works are more suitably aligned with the concept theorized by Edward Soja, known as "thirdspace." Soja regards "thirdspace" as a contradictory type of space that steers clear of simplistic characterizations. It is simultaneously "multiplicitous and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, exuberant and mundane, knowable and unknowable," and "it can be mapped, yet it can never be represented in conventional geography. It can be creatively imagined, but it only becomes meaningful when practiced and lived fully (Soja, 1999) (Figure 6).

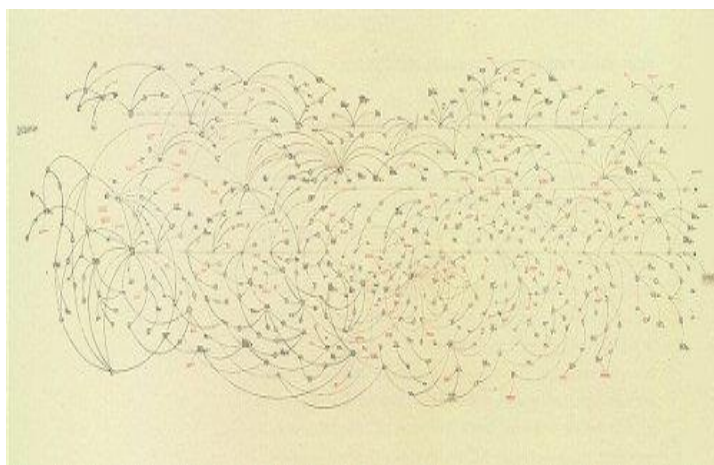


Figure 6: BCCI, 1996-2000. Graphite on paper, Mark Lombardi
(Source: Britaica.com)

The "Third Space," under the banner of Postmodernism, is distinguished by its focus on an ecology-centered postmodern space instead of a globalized postmodern space perceived as fragmented and disordered. It envisions a place where all other places exist. According to the concept of the "Third Space," the works of these artists are imaginative geographical projects that

aim to present everything to us at once, either through simplicity or complexity. Through the philosophy of the "Third Space," Lombardi's works can be considered an encompassing force of reality, while his landscape architecture is not drawn to present "everything" in relation to the totality of nature (Clark, 1985) (Figure 7).

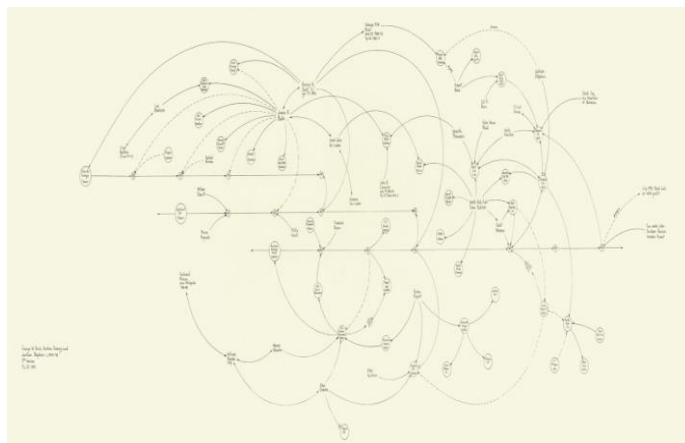


Figure 7: George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens, 1979-1990, Mark Lombardi
(Source: Britaica.com)

In his work titled "George W. Bush, Jackson Stephens & Harken Energy," a series of transactions and suspicious communications among capitalists, politicians, corporations, and governments are depicted. Individuals such as George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, Governor John B. Connally of Texas, Sheik salim bin Laden from Saudi Arabia, and his younger brother Osama bin Laden are present in this piece, sharing a common connection with James R. Bath. Bath is among those who were at the forefront of fundraising (by Oliver North) in the Iran-Contra affair.

One of the most significant contemporary Western landscape painters is Jill O'Bryan. In O'Bryan's works, there is a natural connection with elements in nature such as trees, deserts, and earth. Among her acclaimed works, her desert paintings stand out, capturing her body's interactions with the desert on a grand scale.

Jill O'Bryan's art is not a mere act of representational imagery; rather, it is an exercise in accumulating the remnants of recorded time and space through her physical actions. Her process is performative, situated specifically in time and space, recording moment-by-moment interactions with elements. For her, painting from nature is a dynamic system of marking that reveals both personal and universal experiences of breath, while simultaneously placing audiences in an intimate confrontation with time. For over

twenty years, she has maintained a method at the core of her practice—counting and recording her breaths with graphite on paper. She creates "breath marks" (each corresponding to one inhalation and one exhalation) that appear adjacent to one another on large sheets of paper.

The natural landscapes he creates are more than just a concrete representation of nature; they are a nature-inspired vision that continues to serve the essence and spirit of the artist's searching subject. He openly states: "I started my work as a painter. Initially, outside in the landscape, I learned to see and understand, and later, my paintings became an immersion in process and pigments—just as they were. For me, painting from the natural world was an intuitive and sensory process, and I truly loved it. When I began to study philosophy and contemporary art theory, my relationship with art shifted slightly. I became fascinated by the concept of truth as a variable—for instance, linguistically, there exists a semantic slippage between the signifier and the signified, making precise representation impossible. I experienced these ideas as beautiful and powerful poetic complexities and used them as a framework to write a book about the conceptual art of the postmodern artist Orlan as my doctoral thesis, with the hypothesis that her constantly shifting identity serves as a radical political tool to undermine fixed perceptions of identity." (Figure 8).



Figure 8: The Sound of a Breath, a work by Jill O'Bryan
(Source: www.jillobryan.com)

One of her notable works in recent years is the painting "Two Halves of the Moon," created in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In an interview with a local newspaper, she discusses the process of creating this piece: "In New York, during the spring of 2020, while in quarantine, I experienced a kind of dizziness as I stared at the moon, searching for my own behavior. I gazed at it as it rose from my front window. I watched its slow progression for hours. Even during the day, I traced its outline as silver fragments fading and

appearing in the blue sky. The moon became the focal point of my meditations: I brought it into my body, felt its presence, counted its breaths, and imagined the swelling and deflating of my lungs alongside its rise and fall. I joined those throughout the millennia who have contemplated the moon - its power and feminine energy, mystery, order, gravitational pull, strength, and its role as a holder of myth and knowledge. The moon guided me toward balance, body, and breath." (Jill O'Bryan Art, 2020) (Figure 9).

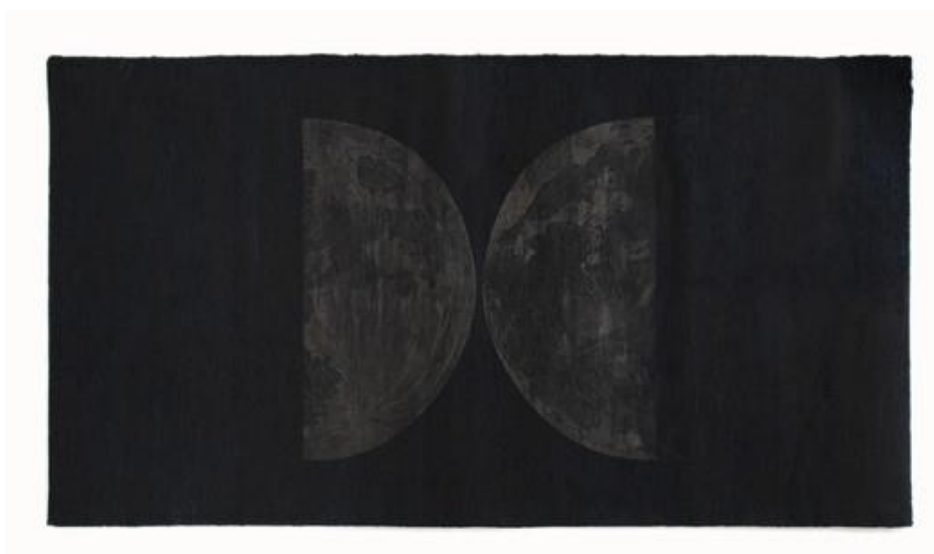


Figure 9: Two Halves of a Moon, a work by Jill O'Bryan
(Source: www.jillobryan.com)

O'Bryan can be categorized among artists whose works highly value natural elements such as sky and earth, moon, and soil. In O'Bryan's works, nature is represented in its spatial form. It can be said that the spatial aspects of nature and the confinement of humanity within this space evoke, rather than the anxiety and disturbance found in the works of earlier artists, a message of aesthetic unity (Casey, 2002). Another prominent artist in contemporary landscape painting is Robyn O'Neil. O'Neil, born in America, is an artist who has created natural landscapes with an unparalleled obsession. A glance at his life shows that a simple event led him to experience prolonged periods of fixation, likely rooted in his childhood and the beginnings of his professional work. Since the age

of 10, O'Neil has been collecting his blanket's lint into a glass ball, a practice that continued into his university years, resulting in a progressively larger ball. His tendency towards repetition over time manifested in the form of circles and repeating points in both his paintings and his subsequent human designs. He has spent approximately eight years creating pencil drawings on the largest sheets of paper. Each piece is the result of months of continuous effort, and he has avoided any form of time wastage in producing this volume of work. Due to its accessibility, he has chosen pencil as his medium and media. This arduous process is directly related to the subjects of his works (Green, 2008) (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Work by Robin O'Neil, 2005, pencil on paper, 91x144.

(Source: Inman Gallery website)

Her works are reminiscent of the styles of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel, which delve into the "failings of humanity and its relationship with nature" (Jill Miller, 2011). Although she has never admitted to being influenced by these artists, unlike many who seek to deny similarities in their works, she explicitly considers this influence significant in the formation of her pieces. She participated in an exhibition titled "Dargerism," featuring artists influenced by the work of Henry Darger. Both

artists—O'Neill and Darger—present apocalyptic imagery and symbolically address the subject of climate. The feelings of isolation and melancholy in their fantastical scenes, along with the large dimensions and horizontal format of their works, underscore the grand tradition of American landscape architecture. Ultimately, both have utilized the landscape as a tool akin to a stage for an anonymous society of men and women (Kevin Miller, 2008) (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Robin O'Neill. These final hours that ultimately envelop us, 2007
(Source: Inman Gallery website)

His works gradually evolved, with plants emerging from beneath the snow. By 2007, the land in his pieces, which covered more than two-thirds of the image, transformed into a sea. O'Neill continues to narrate his story, depicting ordinary men sitting, standing, or lying on boats in a relatively calm sea. This gives the artwork a mysterious feeling, as these men appear to be on the boundary between life and death, occasionally prompting the viewer to consider whether they are in purgatory. Additionally, there exists a struggle between nature and humanity, with the primary issue in society being the absence of women, which significantly complicates human survival as they are devoured by Mother Nature. These men jeopardize their daily lives in the face of the unfamiliar nature. They first appeared in his works when he painted portraits of his father and friends, and after relocating to Texas, he felt an

increasing sense of longing due to the distance from the ordinary people and public figures he was surrounded by in Omaha. His works, reminiscent of an ant colony, convey a sense of unease to us.

Among other contemporary Western landscape artists, Al Denyer is notable for being originally from England, yet drawn to the pristine and untamed nature of Utah, USA. Denyer is recognized for his linear designs and precise paintings that depict landscapes from varying perspectives. For instance, in one of his works titled "LAND BODY," Denyer invigorates the line by installing a fiber wall that references the local mountain ridge. His new medium specifically alludes to traditional women's arts and craft materials such as thread, addressing classical ideas of femininity in art and its relation to nature landscapes (Figure 12).

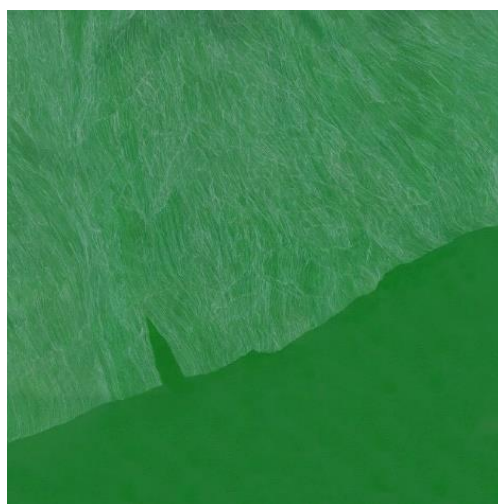


Figure 12: Work by Al Denny, 2021. Ink on paper
(Source: DailyArt.com)

In his new body of work titled "Surface Range," Denyer explores the surface and what lies beneath the Great Salt Lake. He employs broader brush strokes to replicate the geographic fluctuations of the lakebed and the halophilic and ancient bacteria that cause the northern arm of the lake to appear pink. Like other landscape architects, Denyer believes that the landscape has always served as an inspiring artist for him. Issues of landscape and

ecology are intertwined, and the water crisis currently faced by Western countries cannot be overlooked. I feel compelled to address this topic through the language of visual arts. Denyer is among the artists who directly hold themselves accountable for today's critical conditions and aims, through his art, to highlight the destructive impacts that modernity and industry have inflicted on our contemporary environment (Figure 13).



Figure 13: A work by Al Deneir, 2019. Ink on paper
(Source: DailyArt.com)

However, the final artist in this collection is Sallie K. Smith. Sallie K. Smith is an American artist based in Boulder, Colorado. Her paintings, surrounded by beautiful nature, often depict the American West, and "Endless Odessa" is no exception. The magnificent landscapes of

mountains, rivers, trees, and many other elements, characterized by such contrast and vibrant colors, distinctly define her artworks. The value of her artwork "Endless Odessa" is immensely high, reflecting both the formal and content quality of her pieces (Leal Filho, 2000) (Figure 14).

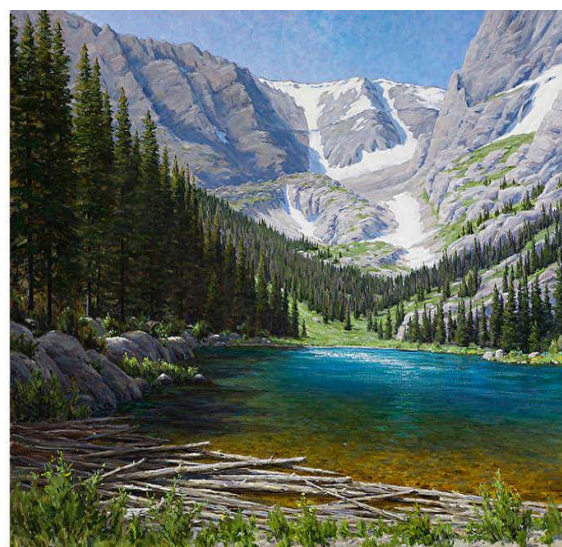


Figure 14: Endless Odessa, 2013, Sally K. Smith
(Source: sallieksmith.com)

Smith believes that finding a location and drawing inspiration from it is one of the primary and essential tasks of any landscape artist. Identifying a place that can encapsulate the essence of geographical elements such as mountains, seas, forests, and rocks is of paramount importance. In an interview, Smith states: "I am always in search of the most beautiful places; I can even visualize scenes in color before I begin painting. I must say that my favorite subjects are rocks, especially when they burst into color in the fall, and water—ponds, lakes, and rivers that draw you in, encouraging you to sit nearby and daydream or walk alongside them to see where they lead. I want people to experience my paintings as a journey, to feel as though they are truly present in the scene, able to follow that waterway, that path through the foliage, perhaps even reaching those distant peaks."

It is quite evident that Smith belongs to a lineage of artists for whom the objective representation of elements of nature holds significant importance. This is because only objective representation can inject an unmediated and direct emotional response from nature into the viewer. The representation of natural elements in Smith's paintings is, in terms of form, very close to that of the Impressionists. In this context, he states: "If I were to categorize my work, I would say that I am an Impressionist landscape artist. I typically work in the summer and autumn, as well as in the studio, and I do most of my studio work during the winter months. My paintings are somewhat interpretive, as I tend to arrange scenes to showcase their most beautiful aspects." (sallieksmith.com)

Conclusion

Understanding the eco-critical elements of contemporary Western nature art is only possible through recognizing the distinctions between contemporary Western art and 18th and 19th-century landscape architecture. In fact, it is through this understanding of distinction that one can uncover the eco-critical elements and environmental characteristics of contemporary Western nature art. The difference between

contemporary and classical artists primarily concerns the nature of nature itself. Classical Western landscape artists viewed nature as a cohesive entity with organic unity. They sought to represent nature as a reality rather than an organic whole. Their works are considered real in that they accomplish much more than mere so-called objective and subjective representations. However, contemporary Western artists emphasize eco-critical elements such as water, soil, light, and sky, portraying nature as an unparalleled and unattainable essence on one hand, while on the other hand illustrating that this nature, represented through depictions of a devastated environment, has been stripped of its eco-critical elements. Thus, contemporary Western nature artists not only reflect nature, but also address the issues and challenges leading to the devastation and pollution of the environment.

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