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TO SEE THE EARTH AS OTHER

John Corso Esquivel

The Ethics of Earth Art by
Amanda Boetzkes. Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press,
2010. Pp. 248. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00
paper.

Assembling a powerful corpus of research and theory, Amanda Boetzkes argues in *The Ethics of Earth Art* that earth art provides a sensible surface upon which subjects can form an ethical relationship to the earth based on its radical alterity to the body. Boetzkes's book is of major importance to artists, historians, and ecophilosophers, but its methodology and dense academic presentation make such strenuous demands that I consider the workings of this ethical relationship to be far from settled.

Boetzkes begins by defining an *ecological stance* as that which "involves revealing the limits of an anthropocentric worldview and recognizing these limits as thresholds to the excess of the earth" (3). Ecological ethics commonly revolve around human ecology; Boetzkes quickly separates her project from anthropocentric ethics, focusing instead on the place where "nature exceeds the scope of human knowledge and systems of representation" (3). Boetzkes notes that, since the 1960s, artists have initiated an ethical engagement with the earth and its ecology to offer a surface upon which viewers can access the "elemental." The artwork reveals how elementals overwhelm the senses, "and specifically how nature troubles representational form" (4). The simultaneous aesthetic excess and withdrawal from representation create "the conditions of possibility for the earth to appear at

the limits of intelligible form and to deliver a sense of it at the point at which it overflows the field of perception" (4). The perceiver is thus put into a relationship with the earth that Boetzkes will characterize as marked by *recessive ethics* (4).

Defined as "a stance of retraction from and receptivity to the earth," the recessive ethics that figure in contemporary art combat two misguided relationships towards the earth (4). According to the "instrumental view," humans mine the earth's resources strictly to reproduce an anthropocentric hegemony. Equally problematic, the "romantic view" imagines a "return to a state of unencumbered continuity with nature" (4). The encounter with earth art frustrates both instrumental and romantic views by proffering an already withdrawn earth. As a recessive other, the earth's relationship to the artgoer is likened to the ethical relationship between a subject and his sexual other, which Luce Irigaray outlines in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993). Boetzkes identifies two characteristics of Irigaray's ethics of difference as particularly important to the ethics of earth art. Irigaray's ethics are driven by a problematic that is born only when one recognizes the other's sexual difference and ponders their irreducible, interstitial distance. Crucial to this recognition is the physical encounter with the other, through which both

subjects open into and onto the other, "through an open and receptive mode of touch that does not attempt to enclose but reinforces the parameters of difference" (21). Earth art, Boetzkes argues, provides a medium through which the human subject develops a similar ethical position by sensing the radical otherness of the earth.

Fundamental to Boetzkes's project is John Sallis's philosophy of the elemental. Boetzkes interprets the *elemental* as "irreducible": "An elemental cannot be analyzed by dividing it into constituent parts, nor can it be summarized as a single entity" (15). Unable to "deliver [an elemental's] sensual fullness" (20), contemporary artists struggle "to make the earth visible" (18) while revealing "its resistance to signification" (18). Boetzkes, therefore, distinguishes between the *earth* (for Edmund Husserl, the *Ur-Arche*), which defies representability, and the linguistically, culturally, and historically inscribed *world*.

Chapter 2 submits Robert Smithson's work as evidence that earth art insists on the unrepresentability of the site. Boetzkes draws attention to the way that Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), an artwork that exists in diverse documentary and material forms, conjoins vision and language. To do so, she retraces the arguments of Craig Owens's influential essay, in which the latter argued that the totality of *Spiral Jetty* always exceeds any

single documentary record (e.g., a photograph or a film). Owens determines that the work exists allegorically, with narratives retrospectively supplementing the limits of any one particular document. Unlike Owens, Boetzkes does not focus on the space or distance between the site and its discursive supplements. Rather, she insists that the “gaps in signification that occur between the texts” serve to make the site’s unrepresentability (the “empty center in the artwork”) its ethical purpose: “The statement is not just that the site is absent but that its totality is not, and never was, possible” (72). Crucial to Boetzkes’s understanding of *Spiral Jetty* is her belief that textuality does not render phenomenal experience unnecessary. On the contrary, the physical encounter with elementals plays a constitutive role in establishing the ethical relationship. By overwhelming the senses, elementals remind the subject of the earth’s irreducibility and, therefore, of its otherness. This does not distance the site through allegory, but recovers for the site its real fullness (91). Bringing earth, water, and light together achieves for Boetzkes an “intertwining of elementals,” and “[t]hrough this overlap of elementals, *Spiral Jetty* demonstrates the earth’s impenetrability and its resistance to unification of form and meaning” (101).

Chapter 3 more thoroughly revisits the earth as “elemental.”

Boetzkes writes, “To posit the earth as elemental is to insist on its irreducibility to the human world and to distinguish it from a bounded and intelligible thing” (102). Since elementals are boundless, they are not intelligible; they are nevertheless sensible (102). As a result, the elemental earth raises the ethical opportunity “for a reconceptualization of the earth itself and of our position in relation to it” (103).

Turning to Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Nancy, Boetzkes investigates the ways that humans define the earth in terms of its natural resources.¹ She invokes Nancy’s term, “ecotechnology,” to remind us that “the discourses that frame nature are inseparable from a set of technological conditions that are produced for us and by us” (104). (Nancy developed the term to qualify Foucault’s contention that, from the eighteenth century, political regimes exercised power over institutions related to the preservation of the organism and the species.² Nancy clarified that “biopolitics” became possible only because of the scientific ability to automanage life through technology, what he called “ecotechnology.”³) Boetzkes states, “Thus, ecotechnology exposes the earth as resource, but it also brings forth the idea of nature, or the ‘truth’ of the elemental earth” (104). This leads Boetzkes to agree with Sallis that “the turn to the elemental is not a move ‘back to nature,’” but a turn towards that which

exceeds the instrumentally conditioned frame of nature (104).

Artists like James Turrell, Chris Drury, and Olafur Eliasson create the opportunity to sense the elemental and thus to look at the face of the earth beyond ecotechnological constraints. These artists “use the artwork to articulate an involution in, and a turn to face, the earth in order to extricate the spectator from the presumed continuity between the body and ‘nature’” (105). Boetzkes continues, “That is to say, by presenting the elemental as a surface, contemporary artists open contact with the Earth’s alterity” (107).

The final half of the book examines what it means to face the earth ethically, emphasizing the fundamental role of alterity in that relationship. Boetzkes follows Irigaray, who repeatedly faults Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology for maintaining a bodily continuity with the world; this narcissistic continuity prevents the subject from recognizing its other, consequently inhibiting meaningful ethical thought. Boetzkes explains, “All sensation becomes translated into ‘Sameness’ and merely fulfills one’s perceptual expectations, so that no true understanding of difference can register” (108). For Irigaray, the recognition of the other is the requisite precondition that allows a subject to ask after the well-being of another. Without differentiation, the subject remains sutured to a solipsistic world, incapable of

empathy because he cannot recognize the existence of others.

Ultimately, Boetzkes argues that earth art positions the subject “at the very site where elementals meet, overlap, and drawback from one another” (115). The elemental “overflows” establish the relationship between the subject and the excessive earth as analogous to Irigaray’s relationship between ethical subject (constituted as male in Western philosophy) and his feminine other as constituted through an irreducible sexual difference. Irigaray understands that sexual difference exists in registers beyond the strictly visual, and she posits a central role for tactility in recognizing the other. Likewise, Boetzkes extends this tactility to the earth art encounter:

[T]he entanglement of tactility and vision are key to the ethical paradigm of earth art. These senses are each provoked, suspended, and reestablished through one another, as a means of eliciting a “facing” of the earth. . . . Though the body is located in a network of natural activity, then, the artworks instigate an involution or turn against the earth in order to gain a perspective of it as other. (147)

This point of contact constitutes the defining (and deconstructive)

limit against which the ethical relationship is forged. In her discussions of Ana Mendieta, Jackie Brookner, and Ichi Ikeda, among others, Boetzkes concludes that this “understanding of the artwork as founded on a sensorial encounter implies that the earth is not just the material of the artwork, or even its catalyst, but an unfathomable presence engaged in a kind of quasi-intersubjective exchange with the artist. . . . The artwork entails a facing of the earth as a radical other, *not as a human subject*” (160, my emphasis).

While I greatly admire the aims of this project, I am concerned about the overall approach to methodology, an approach that I can only understand as a kind of bricolage. It is not that Boetzkes borrows theories from such an extensive roster of diverse, often antithetical philosophers that elicits alarm. Rather, in the bricolage forms these philosophies assume in her monograph, aspects that I consider to be essential components of the original are often missing or at least unnoticeable in Boetzkes’s deployment. I will focus here on one example: the disappearance of sex from Irigaray’s ethics of difference.⁴

What is missing in Boetzkes’s application (though not her discussion) of an ethics of sexual difference to the ethics of earth art is the irreplaceable centrality of sexual difference. To avoid the

anthropocentrism characteristic of an ecotechnological stance, Boetzkes insists that the earth is constituted as radically other—that is, “not as a human subject.” Irigaray’s ethics are necessarily anthropomorphic and are also theorized around specific sexual difference. It is precisely sexual difference (rather than gender difference or abstract “Otherness”) that makes Irigaray’s ethics so complex, contentious, and revolutionary. Judith Butler notes that what is often identified as sexual essentialism in Irigaray’s work might actually form one of its most potent challenges to masculinist philosophy: “[I]t’s clear to me that sexual difference does not denote a simple opposition, a binary opposition. What it denotes is something like the relationship of a presumed masculine symbolic order to what it must exclude and how that same presumed masculine order requires this excluded feminine to augment and reproduce itself.”⁵ Drucilla Cornell confirms the constitutive role of the feminine for Irigaray’s ethics:

If anything, the feminine was a kind of radical otherness to any conception of the real or reality. More than anything else, here I found someone who was deploying the feminine unashamedly in a utopian manner, saying that there is a beyond to whatever kind of concept of

sense we have. And without that beyond being articulated, endlessly breaking up the real, we can't even get to a different kind of ethics. I saw her as creating openings, not just a feminist ethics, but an ethics in which the feminine within sexual difference was crucial to a complete rethinking of the ethical.⁶

I understand that even considering the figure of Mother Earth introduces what could be construed as anthropocentric essentialism, but Butler urges us to consider essentialism more deeply: "But still it's very interesting that essentialism has been collapsed with categories that describe adequately when, in fact, what an essence is is something that is always escaping the domain of appearance."⁷ Maintaining an interest in the feminine earth need not replicate a restrictive cliché; it may actually work in consonance with Boetzkes's recessive ethics. By desexing the earth, *The Ethics of Earth Art* denies the utopian dimension of Irigaray's ethics. The book also denies the feminine its potential as a viable alternative to the unmarked patriarchy normalized in most ecophilosophy.

Desexing the ethics of earth art threatens further consequences: it masks the fundamental heterocentrism that is more readily apparent in Irigaray's ethics. Butler worries about the extreme heterocentrism

of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, which "is all about mom and motherhood and not at all about post-family arrangements or alternative family arrangements."⁸ For Butler, Irigaray

not only brought to the fore a kind of presumptive heterosexuality, but actually made heterosexuality into the privileged locus of ethics, as if heterosexual relations, because they putatively crossed this alterity, which is the alterity of sexual difference, were somehow more ethical, more other-directed, less narcissistic than anything else.⁹

This heterocentrism persists in the ethics of earth art, which similarly privileges the intact surface of difference between subject and the earth as the locus of the ethical encounter. Butler continues, "And I would say that what [Irigaray] has done has completely obliterated the way in which an ethically enabling difference exists in homosexual love."¹⁰ Boetzkes has brought together a provocative combination of phenomenological and deconstructive texts that, as Cornell says of Irigaray, creates openings in which we may completely rethink our relationship to the earth. This book initiates what will surely continue as a lively, unsettled debate over our ethical

stance towards the earth. In future discussions, Drucilla Cornell's *Philosophy of the Limit* (1992) may provide a valuable direction. Cornell shows that Jacques Derrida's philosophy of reading allows us to rethink the ethics of difference. Rather than facing the earth, "reading" the Earth may provide a fruitful avenue through which an ethics of earth art that attends to sameness and difference, presence and absence, might be discerned.

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NOTES

1. It seems, though, that any instrumentally conceived earth is not appropriately called "earth," but perhaps "world."
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 93–95. Unfortunately, the central role of politics and power in Nancy's text remains unacknowledged in Boetzkes's discussion.
3. *Ibid.*
4. I would like to comment also on Boetzkes's extraction of the elemental from Sallis's complex philosophy but am unqualified to do so at length. I suspect that excising the elemental from the complex network of ideas such as the tractive imagination, the monstrous, and the exorbitant does something to the relationality of that term (see John Sallis, *Force of Imagination*, Studies in Continental Thought [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000]). Since Sallis himself considers the relationship of art to the earth, I wonder whether *The Ethics of Earth Art* could have been more convincingly staged from within Sallis's paradigm.
5. Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, "The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell," *Diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 19–42, quotation on 27.
6. *Ibid.*, 20.
7. *Ibid.*, 22.
8. *Ibid.*, 28.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*