River Aesthetics

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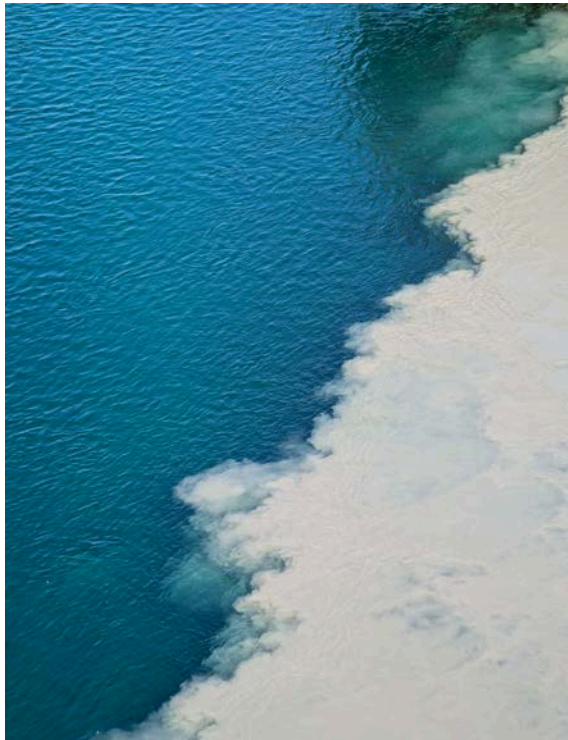2025

Setting the Scene

"We have ourselves become foreign to our everyday"[1] — Ronald W. Hepburn

Introduction

Since moving to Geneva in September 2024 for this master's program at HEAD-Genève, I've walked over the viaduct in La Jonction over 400 times. This is the perfect spot to view the confluence of the Rhône and Arve rivers. Standing high above from a bird's eye view and seeing this natural phenomenon for the first time, I was immediately in awe. My first encounter with the confluence was on a sunny afternoon, bringing out the teal of the Rhône and the white, milky qualities of the Arve. The waters of the rivers swirled before merging downstream.

SEPT 10, 2024 | FIRST PHOTO TAKEN

SCREENSHOT FROM GOOGLE MAPS WITH LABELS

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[1] HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 49–66. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.

After walking over this bridge many times, I've witnessed the confluence in different conditions. On some days, there's an imbalance of the rivers where one extends over the other, or a grey, cloudy sky dulls the colours. Looking back, I was lucky with my first impression of this sight. By walking this path repeatedly, I am able to appreciate my first experience because I have a frame of reference to compare it to. Walking was not only a means of getting from one place to another, but it also helped me connect with this place.

In the context of art, walking has been explored as a medium of expression. Richard Long, a British land artist, creates artworks with nature. He performs with nature through the simple act of walking. His piece from 1967, "A Line Made by Walking" shows a visible straight line in the grass field of Wiltshire, England. The end result is a black and white photograph of the field with no animals or humans, just the landscape and a trace of the path. There's a stark contrast between the wild and the line. Although there is no one visible in the photo, it serves as a reminder of a human presence. As time passes, we can imagine the line fading away and nature persisting.
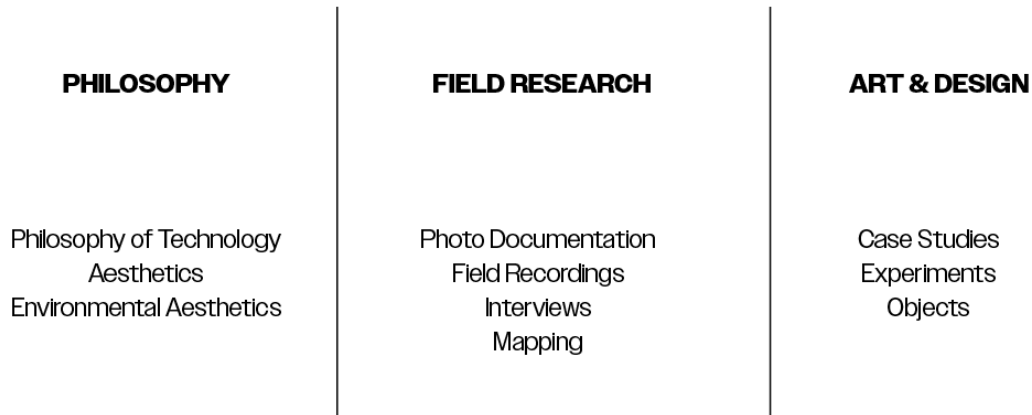
As Spanish philosopher Marta Tafalla notes, "[Richard Long]'s relationship with nature is that of one who passes through it, who recovers old, little-used paths or who opens up new ones."[2] This points to our need to create our own paths, metaphorically and physically. Even in a built environment like a city, there are countless examples of paths designed by urban and landscape designers that are subverted by their walkers. We will look for the quickest and shortest path to our destination, often referred to as a "desire path". You can see this right outside HEAD—Genève, where paths are created in the landscaped area around the main building. In contrast to Long meandering walks, these desire paths in an urban environment are a by-product of our need to efficiently arrive at our destination. We are trying to save time, but Long is taking his time.

I'm somewhat in the middle. I walk across the bridge as a means to arrive at my destination, but I am also there to enjoy the rivers intermingling and Mont Salève and the Jura Mountains in the distance. I try to strike a balance between getting there and taking it in. Walking along the Viaduc de la Jonction, I have no option but to go in a straight line, but this does not mean I cannot appreciate what surrounds me. Although I have to admit, as time goes on, my initial fascination with the confluence blunts. The honeymoon fades and as I start to live my life in Geneva, it becomes part of my everyday. Occasionally, my romance with the site is rekindled.

This is my starting point and the inspiration for my thesis—to explore this relationship I have with this location and understand why I'm drawn to it, despite having no prior connection to Geneva before my arrival. An underlying and more general concern to examine is how we can connect, re-connect, and stay connected with nature in our built environment, fostering a deeper appreciation for it.

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[2] TAFALLA, Marta, 2010. From Allen Carlson to Richard Long: The Art-Based Appreciation of Nature. . Vol. 2.

Pillars of Methods

PHILOSOPHY	FIELD RESEARCH	ART & DESIGN
Philosophy of Technology Aesthetics Environmental Aesthetics	Photo Documentation Field Recordings Interviews Mapping	Case Studies Experiments Objects

[Will update the diagram at the end once I have written everything]

My methodology integrates two core dimensions: theoretical and practical. I will briefly make an incursion into the philosophy of technology to bring attention to how we view nature through interventions and inventions. However, the primary focus will be on environmental aesthetics. This makes sense considering the context of this Master's program, as design can afford aesthetic experiences. But more importantly, this sub-branch of aesthetics aligns with the concept of mediating between nature and art. Environmental aesthetics will provide a framework for analyzing my research and guiding my practical outcomes. Furthermore, by interviewing artists and designers and examining relevant case studies, I will de-centre my perspective and allow myself to take a broader view in approaching my main concern.

I have produced a collection of photos which will serve as a basis to examine the visual aesthetic of the rivers, and I have been mapping the soundscape of La Jonction to understand the acoustic and sonic characteristics of the place.[3] My goal is to understand how to appreciate nature through various sensing channels and media and to develop my practice of field documentation and recording.

I've narrowed down on a specific site for my field research. I purposefully want to work with a location that is close to home, literally. The confluence is just around the corner and is accessible to me at any time of day. Besides being a convenient location, this contributes to my goal of building a situated practice. I want to be able to interact wholeheartedly in the site of

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[3] A collection of field recordings hosted on Aporee. This is a sound map project created by German artist Udo Noll as a way to document the soundscapes of places around the world. There's a standard and quality they uphold to ensure a good listening experience and to represent a location's soundscape accurately. https://aporee.org/maps/work/user.php?u=3849

investigation to understand it, to embody it, to thoroughly grasp its variations and nuances. I have tried to approach my interviews in a similar spirit. In a world where everything is accessible by a mouse click, we can conduct interviews online with anyone around the world. However, spontaneity and magic are lost when we are not face-to-face, just as when we view nature only through the mediation of a screen.

Before exploring the appreciation of nature through the lens of Environmental Aesthetics, I start with a few remarks about our relationship to technology and its connection to the natural world. I think it's essential to set this context, especially because of technology's ambivalence: while it can help us appreciate nature, it can also be detrimental to it.

Three Models of Technology to Nature

There is a contrast between technology and nature. One being of human invention and everything else that is not human. One that feels rigid and the other organic. One that is orderly and the other wild. However, this dichotomy, separation, and distance have contributed to our current problematic state of our relationship with our planet. But what if we thought about our relationship differently?

Mimesis

The ancient Greeks understood technology to be a form of mimesis, that is, "technology learns from or imitates nature".[4] This positions nature as a teacher, helping us find solutions to our human development. We can see instances of this with biomimicry and our desire to fly. From the first attempts of flapping our arms to studying the aerodynamic properties of birds.[5] By learning from nature, we improved our flying techniques.

Air is not the only element we've conquered. We've built dams for various purposes such as irrigation, hydroelectricity, water supply, flood control and recreation.[6] Dams date back to 4th century B.C.E. in Mesopotamia. They were constructed to supply water for crop irrigation, thereby sustaining a growing population. There's no evidence of such dams based on animal inspiration. However, there is a recent development of looking to nature's engineer, the beaver, to construct small dams. These small dams are aptly named "human-built beaver dam analogues" where they mimic beaver dams to use local materials and allow for permeability. [7]

[4] FRANSSEN, Maarten, LOKHORST, Gert-Jan and VAN DE POEL, Ibo, 2024. Philosophy of Technology. In : ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), Tha windmill harnessese Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from : https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entriesechnology/ [accessed 24 April 2025].

[5] PRIMROSE, S. B., 2020. *Biomimetics: nature-inspired design and innovation*. Hoboken, New Jersey : Wiley. ISBN 978-1-119-68334-6.

[6] International Commission on Large Dams, [online]. Retrieved from : https://www.icold-cigb.org/ [accessed 23 October 2025].

[7] WOHL, Ellen and INAMDAR, Shreeram, 2025. Beaver Versus Human: The Big Differences in Small Dams. *WIREs Water*. Vol. 12, no. 2, p. e70019. DOI 10.1002/wat2.70019.

Here, we are not only looking to nature for a solution to control the flow of water in a river, but also to rehabilitate the ecosystem.

Reserve

According to Martin Heidegger, traditional or pre-modern technology is *poeisis* (bringing something into presence). For example, the windmill draws on wind to produce energy.[8] We are not controlling the wind but instead using the wind as is to produce energy. On the other hand, modern technology forcefully attempts to reveal nature through extraction, and in this sense, nature is seen as a standing reserve. The world is subjected to the grip of technology and is reduced to a reserve of raw material. We are challenging what nature is capable of.
For example, we have altered the landscape of rivers and figured out that we can produce energy through hydroelectric power plants. There are 24 dams in total along the Rhône, with 19 located in France and 5 in Switzerland, which regulate the river's flow while generating electricity. The one in Geneva, located at Seujet, accounts for 1% of the city's electricity consumption. In comparison to large hydrodams, this is a relatively small amount as it primarily serves as a way to regulate water flow. However, this small amount illustrates that technology will maximize a resource while revealing what it can do for us.

Prosthetic

The last model is based on the idea that technology is rooted in our human bodies. For Ernst Knapst, he viewed technology as "organ projection"[9] and in Marshal McLuhan's words, "technology is an extension of man".[10] Where Knapst refers to bodily functions, McLuhan means the senses. These distinctions perhaps convey the same concept, because if we say "our eyes", we are referring to the organ and our sight. For example, cameras, telescopes, and microscopes are all technologies that enhance our ability to see on different scales. Even though Knapst and McLuhan arrive at the same idea, I prefer Knapst's concept of "organ projection" because it foregrounds a relationship to the body, connotes vitality, and connects technology operating as a system.

I would like to propose that we attempt to rethink our relationship to nature through this model. What if we saw nature through this lens, and instead of extraction, we are trying to view non-biological entities like a river as full of life with its own internal organs? The concept of viewing nature as alive with organs is not new. Ancient mythologies personified natural entities as deities and gods. The personification of nature is a clear example of human projection, as we shape non-biological entities into a human form.

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[8] Heidegger: The Question Concerning Technology, [online]. Retrieved from :
https://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/heidegger/guide5.html [accessed 6 October 2025].
[9] KAPP, Ernst et al., 2018. *Elements of a philosophy of technology: on the evolutionary history of culture*. Minneapolis (Minn.) : University of Minnesota press. Posthumanities, 47. ISBN 978-1-5179-0226-1.
[10] MCLUHAN, Marshall and LAPHAM, Lewis H., 1995. *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. 2nd printing. Cambridge (Mass.) London : The MIT press. ISBN 978-0-262-63159-4.

The act of personification is an attempt to empathize with nature and to relate to the natural world around us through stories. In contrast, to view a natural entity through Knapt's technological concept is to understand it and to not only amplify its function, but also have the entity benefit from it. This requires us to attempt to see nature as it is. However, I do wonder if this is even possible since we will view nature through our human perspectives and experiences. This idea of nature = nature is also one of the reasons for the field of environmental aesthetics: how to appreciate nature separate from our appreciation of art. I am also hesitant about this separation, since the philosophy of art and environmental aesthetics belong in the same branch, and environmental aesthetics is often discussed in relation to art.

To conclude, there have been harmful effects on the environment when we try to control rivers instead of looking to them as a source of inspiration and to design with them. In the 1960s, the polluted Cheonggyecheon stream in Seoul was converted into an overpass highway. Thinking this would solve issues of people commuting into the city, it caused people to be displaced, increased air pollution and caused economic turmoil through the closure of businesses.[11] It's only been recently that the river has been restored. The effects have been positive by allowing for floods to be managed in the urban environment while providing a public space for people to gather. Even if it's human-made, it demonstrates that we should look to nature and to work with it before making drastic interventions.

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[11] NOT JUST BIKES, 2025. *They Tore Down a Highway and Made it a River (and traffic got better)* [online]. 25 May 2025. Retrieved from : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqGxqxePihE [accessed 31 October 2025].

The Picturesque View of La Jonction

GENÈVE, JONCTION DU RHÔNE ET DE L'ARVE
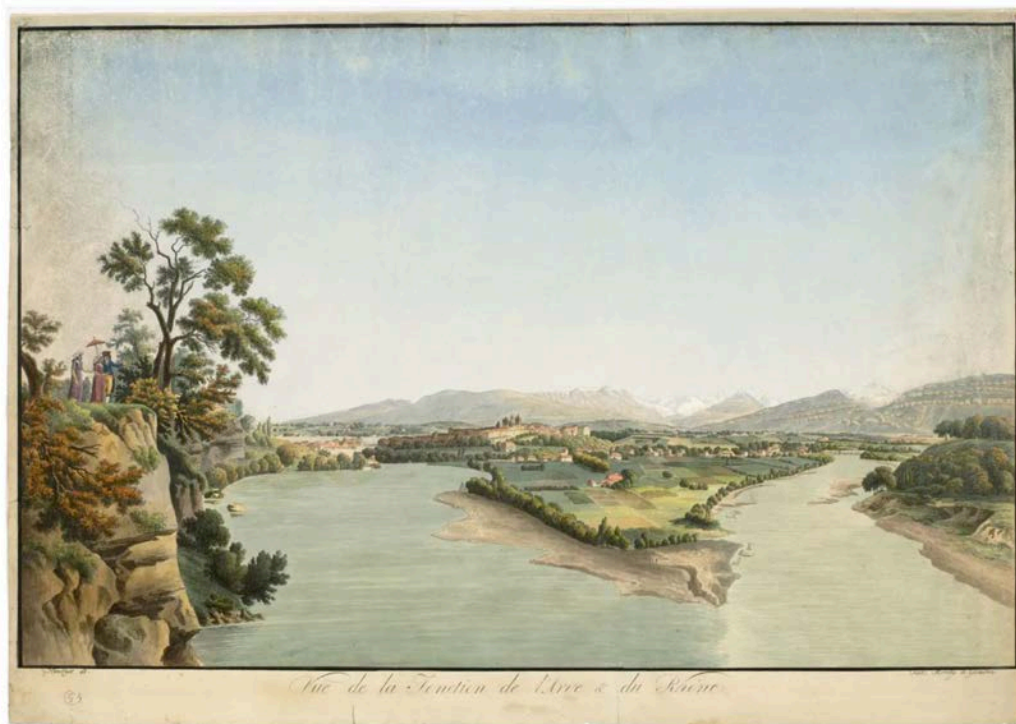
CARL LUDWIG HACKERT
(1740 - 1796), DESSINATEUR
FRANÇOIS MONTY
(1778 - 1830), ÉDITEUR
4E QUART 18E S. (AVANT 1796)

That's So Aesthetic

The word "aesthetic" has been co-opted by people on social media to refer to something stylish or pretty, very often reducing what we see to the purely visual. Instead of saying, "that looks nice", we now proclaim, "that's so aesthetic". The colloquial usage in a social media context involves finding the best way to present a moment and reducing an experience to enforce its visual aspects. In extreme (though not unusual) cases, such qualifications are meaningless. Language changes and words shift, but as Gabriel E. Lipkowitz has noted, "the central problem with our present usage of 'aesthetic,' … is its omission of nearly all meaning traditionally associated with th[is] otherwise very meaningful term."[12] While I agree with this statement, this semantic reduction can also provide insight into how we've previously judged aesthetic objects.

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[12] NASSAUWEEKLY, 2019. The Problem with Calling Something "Aesthetic." Nassau Weekly [online]. 3 March 2019. Retrieved from : https://nassauweekly.com/the-problem-with-calling-something-aesthetic/ [accessed 30 September 2025].
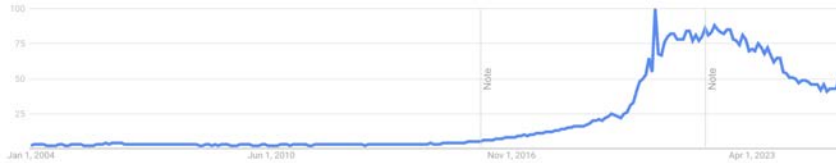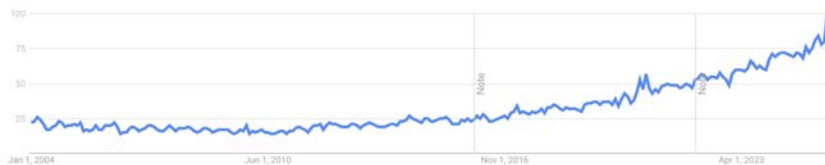
Nature's Beauty

In the 18th century during Enlightenment Aesthetics, beauty was understood objectively through the concept of disinterestedness. This was a shift "from its classical associations with love, possession, and desire, emphasizing instead its disinterested character".[15] Philosophers such as David Hume, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Francis Hutcheson, while they didn't all agree on all parts of aesthetic theory, they did "share the central idea of disinterested pleasure as independent from personal interest".[16] In other words, viewing an aesthetic object disinterestedly means to view an object independent from one's own interests, such as religious or economic gains. For Immanuel Kant, disinterested pleasure also meant that an object's existence is irrelevant to the aesthetic judgement.[17] To focus on the system in which an object is made, is not focusing on the object itself. For example, to aesthetically contemplate a flower is to examine its

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[13] Google Trends, Google Trends [online]. Retrieved from :
https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=aesthetic&hl=en [accessed 30 September 2025].
[14] Same parameters as the previous one. The term here is not referring to the field of study of "aesthetics" but instead the colloquial usage. Google Trends, Google Trends [online]. Retrieved from :
https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=aesthetics&hl=en [accessed 30 September 2025].
[15] PARSONS, Glenn and CARLSON, Allen, 2024. Environmental Aesthetics. In : ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from :
hanttps://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/environmental-aesthetics/ [accessed 15 June 2025].
[16] Aesthetic Attitude | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [online]. Retrieved from :
https://iep.utm.edu/aesthetic-attitude/ [accessed 27 October 2025].
[17] ibid.

form instead of its biological processes and growth mechanisms. Essentially, the aesthetic judgement that the 18th century philosophers are trying to emphasize is that we should be attending to the object only and what we can perceive from it. Then the question is, how do we talk about our aesthetic judgment? We do so by adopting an aesthetic attitude towards an object, which means appreciating disinterestedly its formal properties such as colour, composition, texture, etc.

It's worth noting that in contemporary aesthetics, the aesthetic attitude has been debated and whether there's any validity to the theory. Jerome Stolnitz argues for the aesthetic attitude and states the aesthetic attitude is "disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone".[18] For Stolnitz, the aesthetic attitude is a special kind of attention that's reserved for perceiving an aesthetic object and when we are concerned with an ulterior purpose, or viewing the object as an instrument that can serve us, we are not approaching the object aesthetically. However, George Dickie in "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" debunks this and simply states that we are paying attention or we are not.[19] Dickie does see some value even if he criticizes it because "to take an aesthetic attitude toward a painting…lower[s] [one's] prejudices".[20] In addition, this attitude also allows us to escape a subjective experience and discuss an aesthetic object as a collective experience.

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[18] STOLNITZ, J., 1960. *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism: A Critical Introduction* [online]. Houghton Mifflin. Retrieved from : https://books.google.ch/books?id=1pIfAAAAIAAJ

[19] DICKIE, George, 1964. The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude. *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 56–65.

[20] ibid.

VIEW OF GENEVA FROM THE CONFLUENCE OF THE RHONE AND THE ARVE
ENGRAVED BY FRIEDRICH SALATHE (1793-1860) (COLOURED ENGRAVING)
ORIGINAL BY JEAN DUBOIS

An analysis along the lines of an Enlightened Aesthetics is to exemplify the visual painting properties of "Geneva From The Confluence Of The Rhone And The Arve." The composition utilizes the rule of two-thirds to balance the sky and ground. There's a contrast between the vast sky and the detailed foreground. The soft colours and yellow undertones create a warm morning atmosphere. The inclusion of people in the painting also serves to establish a sense of scale. By now, we are familiar with formal descriptions and their legacy in art and design.

Perception of nature's beauty also extends beyond mere description and is associated with the "picturesque". Historically, this term acted as a label to simply communicate "the sort of landscape painted by artists" that had a balanced composition of a large outdoor view and is often a way to say "picture-like".[21] The concept of the picturesque influenced how we perceive nature, but it also motivated human behaviours. For example, beautiful views are often what we try to protect environmentally. This is also evident in scenic tourism, where the allure of natural

[21] PARSONS, Glenn and CARLSON, Allen, 2024. Environmental Aesthetics. In : ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from : https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/environmental-aesthetics/ [accessed 15 June 2025].

beauty pushes travellers to destinations near and far.[22] Historically, this is reflected in paintings featuring people in the foreground against natural backdrops, and today, in similarly situated selfies. While nature's beauty is viewed objectively and we can all agree on what is beautiful in nature, it seems still to be in the scope of self-interest, at least in terms of the hedonic dimension.

Landscape Model

Landscape paintings modelled our understanding of concepts like beauty and the picturesque, and contributed to the development of art criticism and theory. They also served as important aesthetic objects that fashioned our perspective on nature. Allen Carlson noted that the way we appreciate nature is similar to how we appreciate landscape paintings:

> When aesthetically appreciating landscape paintings … the emphasis is not on the actual object (the painting) nor on the object represented (the actual prospect); rather it is on the representation of the object and its represented features. Thus in landscape painting the appreciative emphasis is on those qualities which play an essential role in representing a prospect: visual qualities related to coloration and overall design.[23]

For example, in the landscape paintings of La Jonction, we can't see the leaves on trees, blades of grass on the ground, or the rocks along the riverbanks. When we view a landscape from a distance, we reduce it, first and foremost, to colour and form. Carlson suggests that we are not appreciating the objects themselves (leaves, trees, grass, rocks), but rather a selection of their salient visual properties.

The Landscape Model for the appreciation of nature brings up another key point mentioned by Ronald Hepurn: art is framed and nature is unframed.[24] Paintings and other art forms are framed because they are bound by their dimensions, selection of scene, descriptions and curation around the artifact. In contrast, nature is unframed since it's constantly changing from moment to moment, season to season, year to year. When we stand in a fixed point, we direct our attention which can be in multiple directions, and as we move through the environment, the horizon line of the landscape changes. In other words, art is contained, and nature is wild.

Given this brief historical context, we can now examine how to move beyond the picturesque and the frame, which can be particularly challenging within a visual culture that is increasingly shaped by screens in general and social media in particular. Hepburn and Carlson, along with many others in the field of Environmental Aesthetics, have answers to this question. I'll apply

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[22] ibid.

[23] CARLSON, Allen, 1979. Appreciation and the Natural Environment. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Vol. 37, no. 3, p. 267. DOI 10.2307/430781.

[24] HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 43–62. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.

their claims in discussing works produced by other artists, designers and myself with the goal of arriving at comprehensive models of appreciation.

A Photographic Study of the Rhône and Arve Rivers
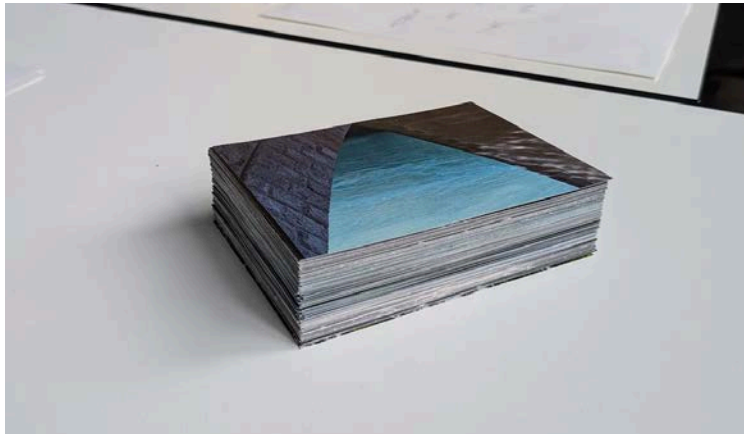
[still need to retake photos of the photos]

Over the three-month period from April to June 2025, I documented the Rhone and Arve rivers with a Nikon Z 6II with a 24-70mm f/4 S lens. The photos are of the rivers from various vantage points around the confluence, primarily from the viaduct. Initially, the photos served as image documentation and field research, but after printing and viewing them outside of a screen, I was drawn into a reflection on the medium of photography and how it can facilitate an appreciation of nature.

Format and Display

A photograph immediately frames nature. This encompasses everything from hardware to post-production and how the photos are displayed within a space, as well as the most obvious, the photo frame. The photographic act is also rooted in framing. There are multiple steps that guide our decision before pressing the shutter button known as "previsulization". As Daniel Pinkas notes in *Santayana at the Harvard Camera Club*:

> [F]raming and shooting encapsulate the very essence of the photographic act, an act that culminates indeed in the "pressing of the button" but under the guidance of a conscious and sophisticated perceptive operation. The expressions "instant recognition of subject and form", "spontaneity of judgment" and "composition by the eye", are some of the ones used to designate what precedes and determines the decision to "press the button".[25]

The photographic act can be described as the art of framing, a throughline that runs from the moment of composing an image to the way it is ultimately presented. Having a frame of mind, however, does not only need to apply to taking a photo. As Stolnitz notes:

> [T]he scene in nature lacks a frame and therefore cannot be grasped and comprehended by the eye and the mind….[A]lthough nature lacks a frame when it simply exists, apart from human perception, this is not true when it is apprehended aesthetically.[26]

The concept of the "frame" appears to be valuable not only in art but also in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Without mentally framing nature in its presence, we might perceive it as wild and chaotic. This raises the question of how we might engage with the idea of framing and unframing in photography, and how such an approach could contribute to our aesthetic understanding of nature.

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[25] PINKAS, Daniel, 2024. Santayana at the Harvard Camera Club. Limbo: boletín internacional de estudios sobre Santayana. No. 44, pp. 5–41.
[26] ibid.

This exercise or arrangement attempts to address the frame. The photos printed are 12.6 cm x 9 cm on regular printer paper. The quality of the paper was less important since I was concerned with how to organize the photos in a coherent display. The focus was on how to present the final image once it is produced. Faced with multiple photos, the viewer can see beyond just one moment and perspective; more specifically, they can see a season in its entirety. This is similar to David Hockney's photographic collages, where he arranges photos from different vantage points and assembles them to create a new scene. In contrast, I've created an orderly display to represent the location of the confluence. There's a clear horizontal axis with the viaduct, and a vertical axis with the dyke separating the rivers that leads to the lookout point.

The reproduction of the location is an attempt to address one of Carlson's points about appropriately appreciating nature:

> We must experience our background setting in all those ways in which we normally experience it, by sight, smell, touch, and whatever. However, we must experience it not as unobtrusive background, but as obtrusive foreground![27]

Carlson argues we shouldn't view nature as a backdrop. Instead, by actively engaging and directing our attention and letting nature disrupt us, we can then appreciate it. Of course a photo cannot replicate smell or touch. I'll attempt to address what the medium of photography can achieve momentarily. The dimensions of the individual photos are small but the overall display could be huge if there were many photos. This would offer the viewer the sense of being on the viaduct. There are close-ups to see details as if you were face-to-face with the rivers which addresses Carlson's point about the landscape model and only viewing nature through colour and form.

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[27] CARLSON, Allen, 1979. Appreciation and the Natural Environment. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Vol. 37, no. 3, p. 267. DOI 10.2307/430781.

One key aspect of nature is that we move through it. We are surrounded in it which brings us closer to nature and reduces the distance that is present in art.[28] However, is it necessary to replicate nature as if you are there to appreciate it through photos?[29]
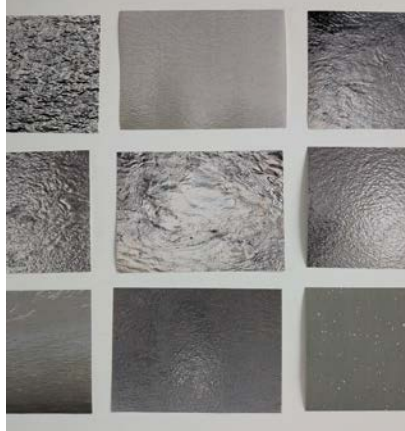
Collection of Evidence

According to Laura T. Di Summa in *Collecting What? Collecting as an Everyday Aesthetic Act*, "with the act of collecting, there is a sense of adventure and discovery." In her paper, she refers to the collection of mundane objects, but this notion can also apply to our everyday environments—in my case, the confluence I pass by daily. I would often look forward to reaching the bottom of Bois de la Bâtie, catching the first glimpse of the rivers through the bridge archway. Before choosing this thesis topic, I took photos casually on my phone, mostly for myself and the occasional post on social media. I would look forward to the new formations of the confluence; even though my path was always the same, the adventure unfolded within the confluence itself. Once I committed to this research, my vision became more focused: I began carrying my DSLR, intentionally seeking various aspects of the confluence to photograph on my way to and from school.

This growing collection soon led me to reflect on the nature of digital photography itself. With digital photography, we are no longer constrained by the economic limits of film. This freedom allows us to document over a period of time and enables us to generate a series of photos at ease. Yet, with this abundance comes a new challenge: we can capture anything, but we must ask whether we are truly capturing, collecting, curating or simply just amassing data. When digital photos are stored on our devices (mobile, computer or hard drives), they can easily

[28] PARSONS, Glenn and CARLSON, Allen, 2024. Environmental Aesthetics. In : ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from : https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/environmental-aesthetics/ [accessed 15 June 2025].

[29] Friday answers with a no and more in depth than what I am able to do within this thesis context. FRIDAY, Jonathan, 1999. Looking at Nature through Photographs. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Vol. 33, no. 1, p. 25. DOI 10.2307/3333733.

become a "dark archive" where collections are forgotten or rarely accessed and enjoyed.[30] This kind of "digital forgetting" mirrors the way we relate to nature in contemporary life: ever-present, yet too often overlooked.

It also becomes difficult to decide which photographs are "the best." In this exercise, by presenting the images as a collection that viewers can pick up and rearrange, I invite them into the artistic process itself. As Thi Nguyen notes, "we often cherish the making of aesthetic judgements, for they require us to put our own efforts into it."[31] I intentionally give agency to the viewer, allowing them to organize the collection according to their own sensibility and invite them to work on their aesthetic judgement. In doing so, the work not only deepens their aesthetic engagement with the photos but also with the rivers. This also mirrors the constant change of the environment itself—each interaction changes the top-viewing photos, leaving them different for the next person.

An aesthetic experience occurs when we see a collection of photos that belong together. We can view the object in multiple instances and appreciate it across different time periods and points of view. Through repetition, certain visual qualities are amplified, creating rhythm and intensity that a single image cannot achieve. When organized thoughtfully, this accumulation becomes a powerful visual form. With each new image, we are given a new piece of information that contributes to our aesthetic judgement of the object. This is evident in Instagram carousel images, which allow users to post a series of related photos, as well as in monolithic coffee table photo books that highlight one object, or a museum curating a collection. This can be extended to a series of photos of the same subject matter in nature. It's the diversity and variation that draw us in.

This diversity of photos informs us of the landscape. This implies that we appreciate learning about the environment, whether it's the changes within a season or the appearance of the water's surface at different times of day. As Hepburn puts it, "Nature is not a 'given whole,' nor indeed is knowledge about it".[32] This suggests that nature cannot be aesthetically experienced as a whole but rather individually through its parts. Necessarily, through the appreciation and coordination of its parts, it also implies a cognitivist view that we appreciate nature through knowledge about it.[33]

[30] CERONI, Andrea et al., 2015. To Keep or not to Keep: An Expectation-oriented Photo Selection Method for Personal Photo Collections. In : *Proceedings of the 5th ACM on International Conference on Multimedia Retrieval*, pp. 187–194. New York, NY, USA : Association for Computing Machinery. 22 June 2015. ICMR '15. ISBN 978-1-4503-3274-3. DOI 10.1145/2671188.2749372.

[31] Author directly quotes Nguyen from 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement. SUMMA, Laura Di, 2022. Collecting What? Collecting as an Everyday Aesthetic Act. In : CHEYNE, Peter (ed.), *Imperfectionist Aesthetics in Art and Everyday Life*. Routledge.

[32] HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 49–66. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.

[33] PARSONS, Glenn and CARLSON, Allen, 2024. Environmental Aesthetics. In : ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from : https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/environmental-aesthetics/ [accessed 15 June 2025].

Expressive Qualities
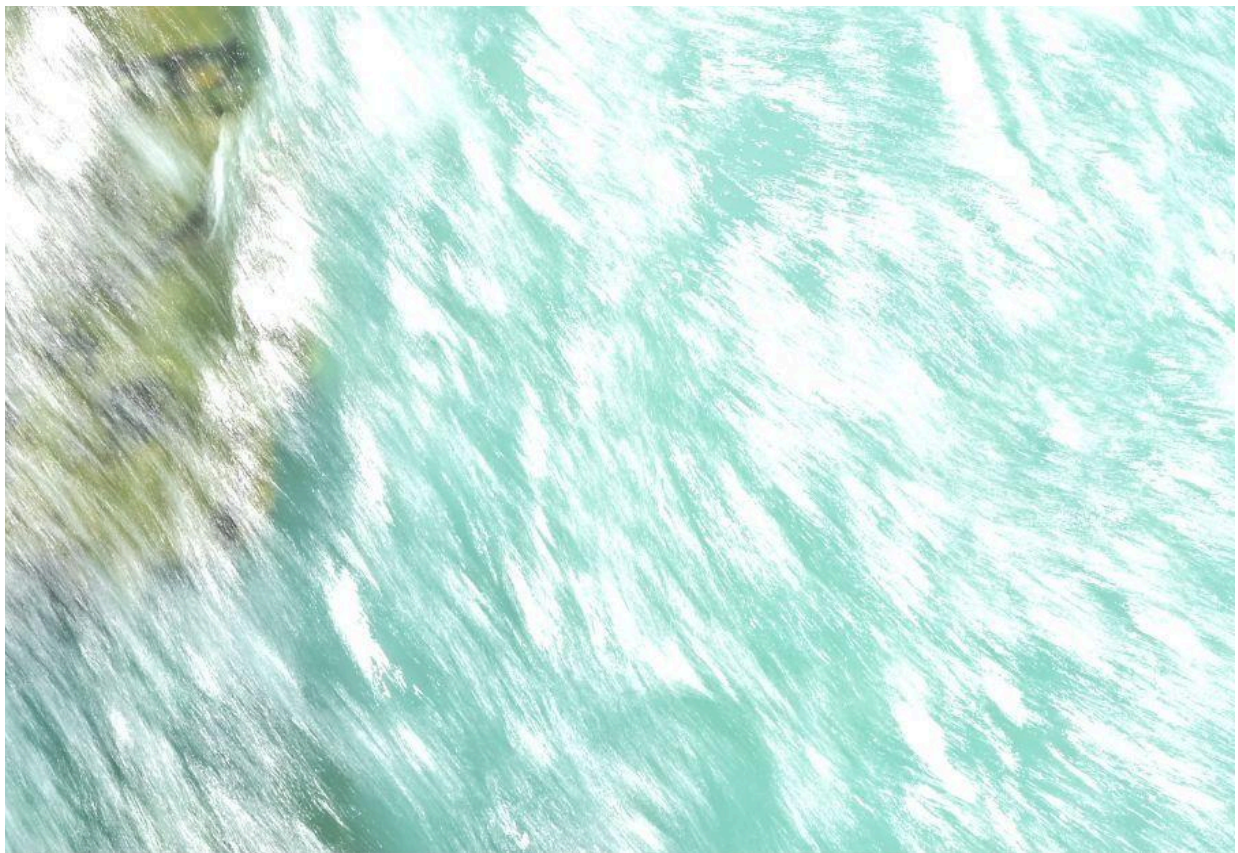
Photographic transparency is a recurring topic in writings on photography. Although the theory is questionable—since it suggests that we are actually looking at the object in the photo—it continues to shape how we discuss the medium. To briefly summarize the counterarguments: the bodily orientation argument claims that a photograph doesn't allow us to spatially locate the depicted object or orient ourselves around it as we would in real space. The anti-transparency argument, on the other hand, draws on scientific reasoning, suggesting that the light emitted

from the photographed object is altered by the medium of display—whether on a screen or on paper—thus breaking the direct connection between the viewer and the object.[34]

In *Looking at Nature through Photographs* by Jonathan Friday, he uses mirrors to support the notion of transparency. He states, "Mirror images have the same counterfactual dependence upon the appearance of the world that photographs do."[35] In other words, mirrors and photographs operate similarly: if you were to wave at yourself in a mirror, the reflected image would change accordingly, just as a camera would capture that change in a photograph. Friday continues:

> Moreover, we treat mirror images as means by which we can see objects in the world that could not otherwise be seen given our position. For example, we can use mirrors to see what is behind us or around corners.[36]

Friday introduces mirrors to reinforce the transparency theory. He argues that they enable us to see things beyond our direct perspective. This idea opens an intriguing avenue for thinking about photography. Like mirrors, cameras can reveal what lies beyond our immediate position or attention. The notion of "blind spots" becomes a compelling concept: what does the camera make visible that our eyes alone might miss?

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[34] PINKAS, Daniel, 2024. Santayana at the Harvard Camera Club. *Limbo: boletín internacional de estudios sobre Santayana*. No. 44, pp. 5–41.

[35] FRIDAY, Jonathan, 1999. Looking at Nature through Photographs. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Vol. 33, no. 1, p. 25. DOI 10.2307/3333733.

[36] ibid.

One example is long exposure photography, which has the ability to capture motion and light over an extended period of time. In this photo, the aim is to capture the aesthetic quality of confluence waves in motion. In person, you get a sense of movement from the shimmering light on the waves, but you do not see the continuous lines moving in different directions. It is only apparent through photography and can only be perceived through a photo.

When we are viewing a photo of nature that we are not able to experience in person, Friday argues that this is photography's ability to capture nature's expressiveness.[37] This goes beyond documentation and not presenting exactly what we see in person. We could say that this photo has a tranquil feeling because of the soft whisper-like waves and the calming blue-teal tones. According to Noël Carroll, this is how expression is understood within the context of art:

> At root, all expression theories maintain that something is art only if it expresses emotions. "Expression" comes from a Latin word which means "pressing outward" —as one squeezes the juice out of a grape. What expression theories claim is that art is essentially involved in bringing feelings to the surface, bringing them outward where they can be perceived by artists and audiences alike.[38]

Carroll goes into greater depth, but the key idea to take away is that something within the artist is transferred into the artwork, allowing audiences to perceive and extract that emotion—eliciting a corresponding feeling within themselves. However, since nature is not created by humans, how is it possible that we still experience emotional responses toward natural objects?

One might argue that the expressive qualities of a photograph stem from the depiction of a natural object, yet we also project our own feelings onto nature. For example, we call a tree a *weeping willow*. According to Hepburn, when we aesthetically contemplate nature, a *rapprochement* occurs between the viewer and the natural object—in other words, a sense of unity forms.[39] This is what we mean when we say "to be one with nature." For Hepburn, such unity emerges through a process of humanizing nature, attributing it with human emotions.

Expressive contrast in a photograph also shapes our aesthetic experience. In design, we understand contrast as a key principle that helps us perceive and organize visual information. But what about in nature? For Hepburn, contrast in nature takes the form of a "paradoxical union" where opposing qualities coexist.[40] His example is a boulder tumbling down a hill: a massive, seemingly immovable object suddenly in motion. Witnessing this contradiction produces an aesthetic experience that captivates us precisely because it defies our expectations of how such a natural object should behave.

In viewing long-exposure photographs, we might experience a similar paradox. The soft teal tones of the converging waves convey tranquillity, yet the visible motion of the water introduces a sense of vitality and excitement. This suggests that we appreciate multiple aspects of nature simultaneously—and that when these qualities are captured in a photograph, they evoke our aesthetic appreciation of both the photo and the natural world it depicts.

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[39] HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 49–66. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.
[40] HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 127–140. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.

Fluvial Data

Scientistic Scenes

Just thoughts here.

Talk about how there's been a study about creating an equation to quantify scenic beauty. I'm trying to find a way to transition into the next chapter, which will focus on the cognitivist view. The point I wanted to make is that dissecting an image using mathematical or scientific methods detracts from the aesthetic experience. An idea that has been expressed by Hepburn already.

Although, I do want to make a connection that NEM (natural environmental model), can contribute to our deeper appreciation of nature once we've moved beyond the aesthetic appreciation. However, then the question is, how does NEM relate to aesthetics, and rather aligns with science?

The study is from here SHAFER, E. L. and MIETZ, J., 1970. *It Seems Possible to Quantify Scenic Beauty in Photographs*. . Upper Darby, PA : USDA Northeastern Forest Experiment Station.

Tracking Rivers

Literally through numbers, a phone number, I've been receiving data about the Rhône and Arve rivers to my mobile on a daily basis.

Cognitivist lens, producing knowledge about the rivers, well in this example data, but the data could lead to knowledge. For example, seeing the increase of temperature relates to climate change. Not necessarily NEM because it's not about natural history or the origins of the rivers. So maybe the title of the chapter needs reconsideration.

Thought this could be a good lead into cartography because it's a way to try to objectively look at the land. It's a different type of image of the landscape.

Mapping the Land
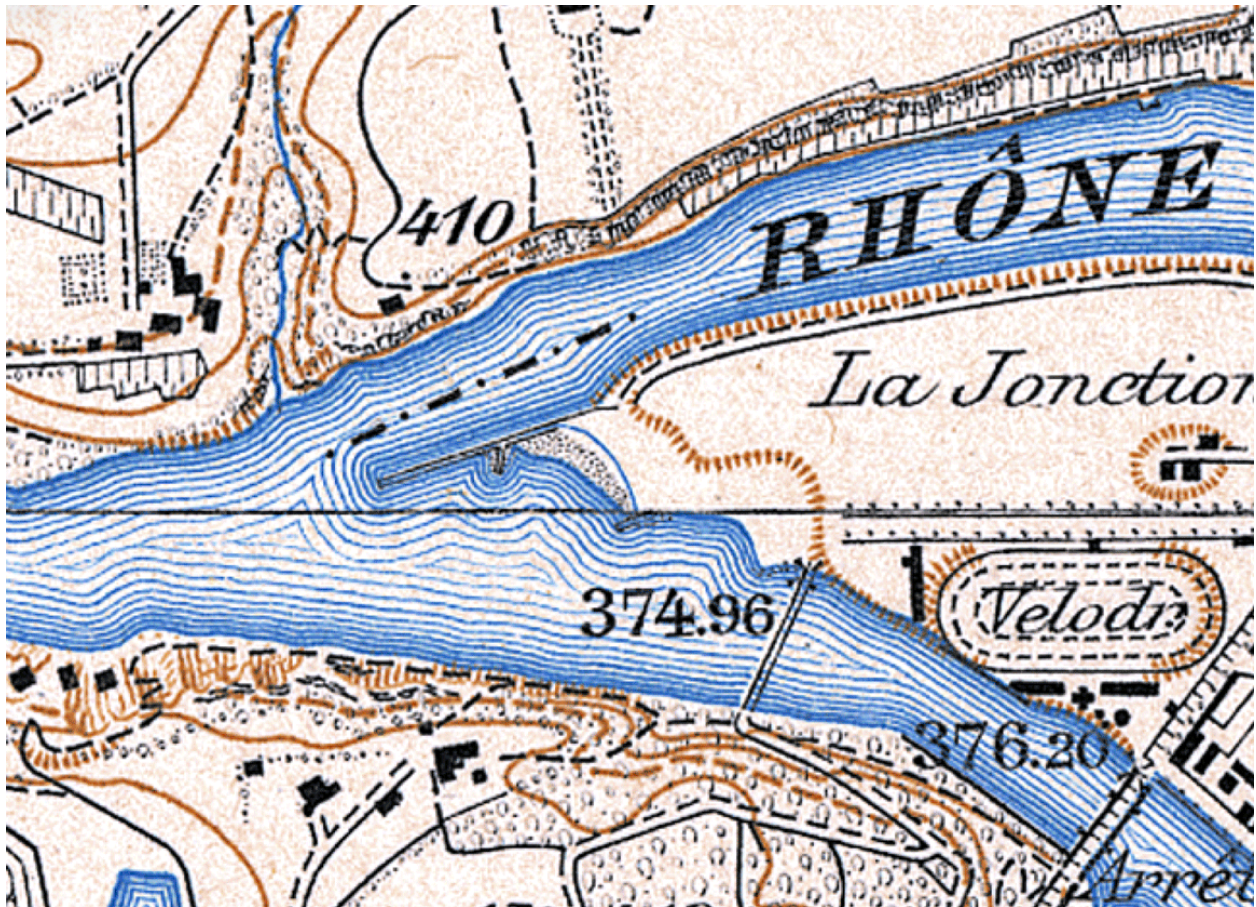
FROM GEO.ADMIN.CH

Making sense of an environment through mapping. This requires being in the space and being immersed. It's another way of understanding a place that goes beyond just the formal qualities because you can embody the location. And with this, it can lead to psychogeography, opposed to cartography.

In contrast to the satellite and cartographic maps, psychogeographic maps are personal and objectively incorrect. Instead, they try to capture the essence through the line drawings or compartmentalize the location into its individual components. This is my individual experience not just from this exercise, but from a culmination of going along this path on a daily basis.

Here can reference Nicolas Nova's observation exercise on psychogeography and Aesthetic Appreciation And The Many Stories About Nature by Thomas Heyd.
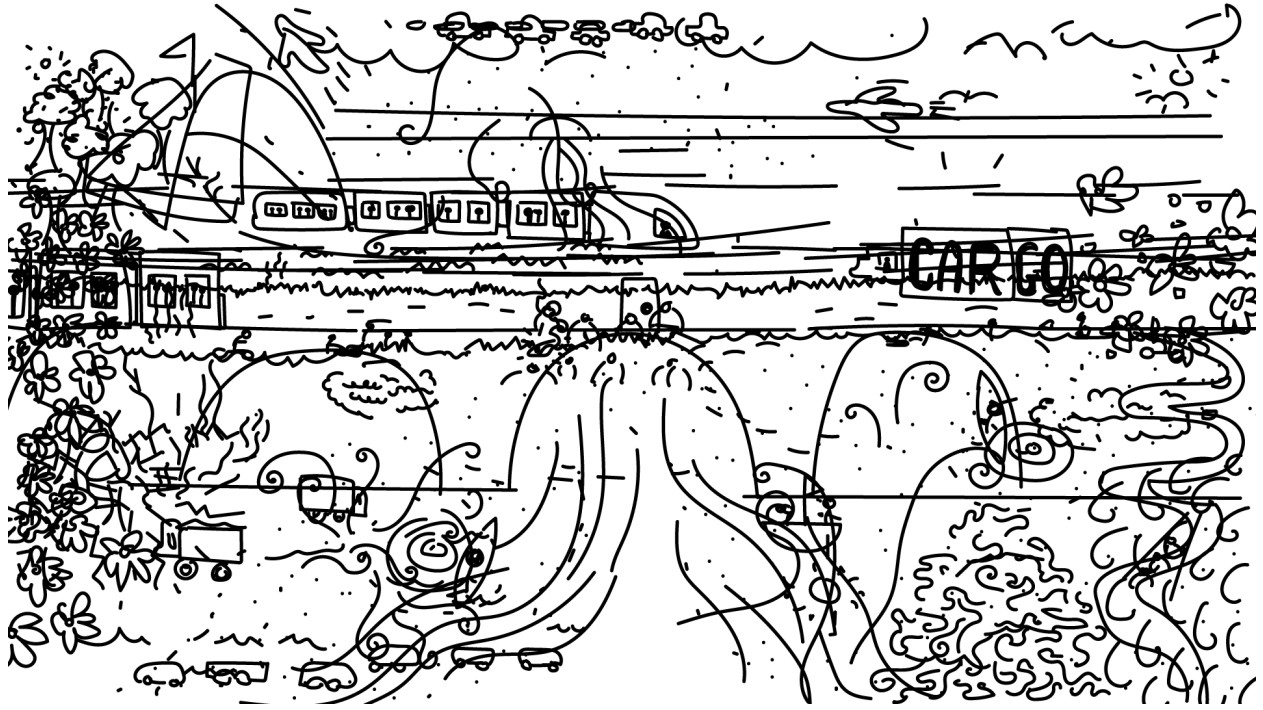
SOUND + LANDMARK + VEHICLES AND PEOPLE + ODOUR MAPS OF THE CONFLUENCE AREA

Giving Voice to Rivers

Personhood

Prosopopoeia

With sound, there's also the idea of a voice. Personifying/humanizing rivers and referencing Ronal Hepurn on his ideas of humanizing nature. Support with projects such as Natural Networks by Six:Thirty x Matteo Loglio and The Ecological Intelligence Agency by Superflux which uses a poetic tone for personifying the rivers.

Field Recording Practice

Conclusion