

The Transfiguration of the World into an Artwork — A Philosophical Foundation of Environmental Aesthetics —

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In recent years environmental aesthetics has appeared on the academic scene as one of the central topics in aesthetics.¹⁾ The concern with environmental aesthetics seems to have arisen from two factors: the awareness of our environment becoming increasingly ugly and, more importantly, the sense of the urgent necessity to deal with the probable ecological disaster threatening both nature and human species. The problem of the environmental aesthetics is then not only how to make our environment 'aesthetically satisfying' in the vague sense of 'beautiful' but also and more urgently how to avoid the possible ecological disaster with which we are faced in the age of highly technological industrial development taking place all over the world.

How to solve the problem? Unless we can be content with leaving the solution to an unprincipled chance, and if we find the solution too vital and urgent, the solution must be guided by reason, and controlled by certain principles. The problem of the environmental aesthetics is theoretical before being practical. The environmental aesthetics is then primarily initially a matter of *theoria*, not *praxis*. The primary objective of the environmental aesthetics is to provide a theoretical framework within which its practical objective can be guided and justified. But is the project of the environmental aesthetics practically possible? If so, how is it possible? What would be the philosophical foundation of such an environmental aesthetics?

The purpose of the present paper is to provide an answer to these questions. It intends to argue that the satisfactory practical project of the environmental aesthetics is both theoretically and practically possible and can be realized through what I would call à la Danto²⁾ 'the transfiguration of the world' into an artwork. By this I mean that artwork must serve as the model/paradigm of both the *Weltanschauung* as a theoretical view of the world and the practical project of the environmental aesthetics. I shall try, first, to explain what the 'transfiguration of the world into an artwork' refers to, second, to show what the world transfigured into an artwork looks like, and third, to draw some philosophical and practical implications of the project of the environmental aesthetics in order to suggest the necessity of revolutionizing our heretofore accepted epistemological, metaphysical and axiological

1) see for instance Yrjö Sepänmaa, *The Beauty of Environment*, 1986; Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics, Conserving Natural Values*, in 19??; Arnold Berleant, ed., *Art and Engagement*, 1990, and also by the same author, *Aesthetics of Environment*, 1992;

Thomas Munro, "'Beautification' reconsidered", in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Spring 1966; In June 1994 the First International Congress on 'The Aesthetics of Environment' was held at Helsinki.

2) The title of one of Arthur C. Danto's books is called *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981)

conceptions, in short, our *Weltanschauung*, and of reorganizing the relationships among different divisions of human tasks.

I. Artwork as the Model of the Environmental Aesthetics

Today nobody is insensitive to increasingly vulgar and unpleasant urban environment, to the conflict between industrial/ human development and environmental/ ecological preservation, between a man and another, and between nature and human species. The philosophical task of the environmental aesthetics then must be to preserve and restore the lost harmony among everything in the world at all levels.

Where could we find the model/ paradigm of the environmental aesthetics? That model/ paradigm can be found in artwork. For what an artist tries to do with respect to a particular object or objects within the world is in essence what environmental aestheticians intend to do with respect to the world as large. On the one hand, in creating an artwork, the artist transforms mere things, objects, colors, sounds, movement and letters of diverse sorts which as such are initially devoid of any semantical meaning, into a single organic whole in which every element contributes to create a harmonious and intrinsically valuable whole endowed with linguistic meaning. What this implies is that once transformed into an artwork, its constitutive components cannot be treated as mere objects, hence exploited as mere instruments for our purposes, but as text whose meaning we have to be read into, and which are to be appreciated on its own right. In other words an artwork requires us not to treat it as a mere object just like a stone or a spoon with no intrinsic value and linguistic meaning but as a meaningful harmonious single totality. On the other hand, the concern with the environmental aesthetics is to reconstructing the environment, i.e., the world as a whole in such a way that it could be 'aesthetically' satisfactory. The environmental aesthetics seeks to restore the harmony among every entity including human beings and every event in the world, which has been lost and is in the continuing process of being lost due to uncontrolled industrial exploitation of human beings as much as nature through ever sophisticating technological manipulation.

If this is the deep, though hidden, project of the environmental aesthetics, what the environmental aestheticians in fact seek to do is, from the formal point of view, exactly the same as what an artist tries to do in creating his artworks. They all are concerned with creating artworks. The only difference between them lies in the fact that while the latter is concerned with creating particular, as it were, regional and thus infinite number of artworks out of things and events in the world, the former with the single artwork now to be called 'the world' out of the world that has not been an artwork. It is in this way that an artwork can be used as the model of what the environmental aesthetics aims to accomplish, and that an artist can be looked at as the model of the environmental aestheticians. And if an artwork can thus be used as the paradigm of the project of the environmental aesthetics, the project is done when the world both natural and cultural has been transformed into the single artwork, in which all the artworks as well as everything else including all human beings and their activities are to be seen as constitutive components.

Is the concept of the world as an artwork intelligible? If so, is it practically possible to create the world-artwork? Unless the answers to these questions are positive, the whole idea that the artwork serves as the paradigm of the environmental aesthetics turns out to be empty. Luckily the answers are 'yes'. The concept of the world-artwork is intelligible, and the project of the environmental aesthetics can be worked out through "the transfiguration of the world into an artwork".³⁾

But how is it possible to transfigure the world into an artwork? Let us consider the possibility of transfiguring any particular object or event in a particular artwork prior to the possibility of transfiguring the world in the artwork. Nothing in itself is an artwork. Artwork is an artifact. Normally an artifact is a physical object made from or of some other physical objects by modifying and rearranging them. An artwork is no exception. Is it then possible to transfigure mere artifacts, events and mere natural objects into artworks without physically modifying them? The question is not its possibility, for the process has already been taking place for sometime. With Duchamp, Warhol, Christo, Calder, Kienholz, Beuys, Namjune Paik, Cage, Dadaist poets, and, more generally with the notion of conceptual art, the perceptually distinctive line between art and real things, between poems and mere words, has become increasingly doubtful, if not evaporated completely. This fact can be interpreted as the disappearance of art as a ontologically distinctive class of objects, constituting, once again in the words of Danto, "the end of art." This historical fact, however, is far from being the case, for Duchamp's *Fountain*, Warhol's *Brillo Box*, Christo's *Californian Fence*, Calder's *mobiles*, Kienholz's *Yip-Mono Series # 19*, Beuys' *Two Horns*, Namjune Paik's *TV Horse*, Cage's *4'33* are not ordinarily things or events: they can exist only as 'artworks' open to some semantical interpretation, and appreciated for its aesthetic value.

If objects, events and state of affairs in the world can be transfigured into an artwork, why could not the world as such be transfigured into the artwork? The initial answer to the question may appear negative. For the concept of artwork as a classificatory sense is intelligible only if this class of object is differentiated from the rest of the classes within the world. It seems to have an application only to a class of object within the world, not the whole taken as a whole. Upon a little reflection, however, it is not absurd to apply the concept of artwork to the world as a whole. To say that Duchamp's urinal is an artwork called 'Fountain' means that it is seen as an artwork. A mere urinal can be transfigured into an artwork by our perspective on it. If so, extrapolating this logic of transfiguration, it is logically also possible to transfigure the entire world into an artwork by taking a new perspective on it, or by seeing the world as a whole, as Nietzsche asked us to do, "through the lens of art".⁴⁾

A philosophically profound Chinese Zen poet provides one of the best examples of this transfiguration of things in this following poem:

3) For this term I was suggested by the title of Arthur Danto's book: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, 1981

4) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Francis Golffing tr. (A Doubday Anchor Book, 1956) p. 6

Mountain is mountain and water is water.
 Mountain is not mountain and water is not water.
 Mountain is water and water is mountain.
 Mountain is mountain and water is water.⁵⁾

In the first line mountain and water are classified as they are normally. But in the second line the physically identical mountain and water are transfigured first into a nonmountain or nonwater, then in the third the mountain into water and the water into mountain, finally in the fourth the original mountain into a different kind of mountain, and the original water into a different kind of water. If the Chinese poet can transfigure mountain into water or water into mountain, it is equally possible to transfigure not only mountain or water but also the world as a whole into an artwork.

II. The World transfigured into an Artwork

What would the world transfigured into an artwork look like? The question is what it is to see and treat something as an artwork. And the answer to the question hinges on what we should mean 'artwork', or on how we understand the defining properties of an artwork. We have already given an answer. But let us elaborate on it a little more.

In whatever else it may be defined, an artwork in the classificatory sense must have two different properties: semantical and axiological. Part of the meaning of an artwork is that an artwork is a kind of language defined in the broadest sense, and that it has an intrinsic value to be appreciated for on its own right. On the one hand, if Duchamp's urinal called *Fountain*, perceptually undistinguishable from all other urinals, is artwork while the rest of them are not, and if certain things, happenings and landscapes are transfigured into artworks by conceptual artists while the perceptually exactly same things cannot be made into artworks by nonartists, and on the other hand, if insofar as artworks, they can be natural in kind, what distinguishes fundamentally between Duchamp's urinal and the rest, between conceptual artists' things, happenings and landscapes and ours must be nonnatural as much as nonperceptual properties. It follows then that the essential property of artwork, as Dickie argues for, is necessarily institutional in the sense that it is constituted by man for certain purposes.⁶⁾

Institution is, however, many in kind: legal, educational, political and so on. Language is certainly one of the institutions, and most basic and universal at that because it underlies the rest of them. The fundamental feature of language is its symbolic function to the extent that it stands for something other than itself, and thus has semantic meaning. Whatever else function it may seem to have, the function of art is symbolic/ linguistic insofar as it either represents realities external to an artist, or express thoughts internal to an artist. For, devoid of one of these functions, the concept of artwork is unintelligible. Thus an artwork must be seen as a kind of language, even when its medium is not a verbal language.

If all artworks are language of a sort, not all languages are artworks. In order for

5) My translation from the Chinese

6) See George Dickie, *Aesthetics* (Indianapolis; The Pegasus Books, 1971)

language to be an artwork, it also must exist insofar as an object of perceptual appreciation on its own right. To talk about appreciation is to talk about value. However values can be divided into two kinds: instrumental, i.e., extrinsic and noninstrumental, i. e., intrinsic. On the one hand the value of a house, clothes, technology and even part of education is extrinsic because it can be made intelligible only with reference to their respective instrumental function. On the other hand some of educational and moral values must be intrinsic because the appreciation of them does not require any other references other than themselves. The value of an artwork described as 'aesthetic' in the sense of the experience through senses is intrinsic. For, just as roses and Mt. Fuji are supposed to be appreciated in their own right, even Duchamp's urinal, *Fountain* and shovel, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* are exhibited in museums primarily as objects of appreciation in their own right while other urinals and shovels are not. If, as Goodman believes⁷⁾, the function of an artwork is confined either to represent certain things or facts, or to express certain ideas or feelings, that is, to be cognitive, in the broadest sense, then, it is impossible to make sense that artworks are exhibited in museums, performed repeatedly in theatre and music halls. This is to say that one of the defining properties of an artwork as language must also be to be an object of appreciation on its own right, i.e., for its intrinsically valuable quality for sense experience. Then an artwork can be defined as a language having an intrinsic value to be appreciated not only through intellect but also and more fundamentally through senses, and its defining function must be at once 'cognitive' and 'Aesthetic'. By nature every artwork intends to be both cognitively and aesthetically most satisfactory, should be valued at once by both points of view. If truth, knowledge and enlightenment are the criterion of the cognitive value of an artwork as having semantical function, fundamental and underlying canons of the aesthetic value of the artwork insofar as a linguistic medium are such qualities as harmony, elegance, excellence and so on.

If an artwork is defined as a symbol/ language to be appreciated for its intrinsic value, what does it mean to transfigure the world into an artwork? It means to make the world as a whole a symbol/language signifying something, which is as much to be appreciated as an intrinsic value, i.e., the value of harmony in its own right as to be read into, thus understood in terms of a text having an ideal content. This in turn also means that the world is to be seen not as a mere object to be exploited as an instrument for human purposes but as a single harmonious and significant whole having its intrinsic value to be appreciated and respected for its own sake. Seeing the world as an artwork then demands a certain metaphysical attitude toward the nature, the place of man in it and their relationship.

The poem, *Correspondences* by Baudelaire provides one of best possible poetic descriptions of the world/nature as transfigured into artwork, which reads as follows:

7) Nelson Goodman, see for instance *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Harvard University Press, 1984), where he says:

"The term 'appreciation of art' and the term 'beauty' and a few others are nearly taboo for me because they have been associated with so much nonsense. Rather than appreciation of art I am concerned with the understanding of art, the grasping of it.....' (A)ppreciating' seems to me to suggest that art is purely entertainment, enjoyment, emotion. The habit of thinking of science as purely intellectual and art as purely emotional has muddled much thinking about both art and science." (p.197)

Nature is a temple whose living spires
 Send mingled words at times upon the air;
 Man journeys through a wood of symbols there
 That kindle, as he goes, with friendly fires.

As long-drawn echoes in a far-off bond
 Blend in a deep and shadowed unity,
 Vast as the night and as vast clarity,
 Color and sound and fragrance correspond.

Some perfumes are as fresh as the cheek of a child,
 Sweet as the hautboy, as the meadow green,
 Others are triumphant, rich, defiled.

With all the expansion of infinite things,
 Of amber, incense, musk, and benzoin,
 Where the transport of the soul and the senses sings.⁸⁾

In this poem the Nature understood as the perceptual totality ceases to be mere phenomena / things to be objectively described. Instead it constitutes 'forests of symbols', 'a temple where live pillars often let out confused speech', and thus a single unified living totality of symbols/ signs just as an artwork. As the unified totality of symbols the Nature ceases to be mere objects explainable in terms of mechanical system, to be manipulated and exploited for human utilitarian purposes, but constitutes a single unity of different

- 8) Translated and edited by Dagobert D. Runes in *Treasury of The World Literature*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), pp.96-7
 See the original in Lagarde & Michaud, ed. *Les Grands Auteurs Francais du Programme: XIX siecle*, Paris: Bordas, 1957, p. 431

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
 Laisent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
 L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
 Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
 Dans une ténébreuse and profonde unité,
 Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
 Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
 Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
 — Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
 Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
 Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

signs/languages imbued with profound symbolico-semantic meanings to be understood, where everything 'responds to each other', which is to be appreciated for its own intrinsic aesthetic value, for its relational harmonious order. With Baudelaire's poem the world/nature has now transfigured into a single metaphysical artwork.

To see the world as an artwork is to see it as described, for instance, in the above poem by the French poet. Once we see the world in this way, the world ceases to appear as giant a mere object explainable in terms of mechanical laws and thus exploited by us for the anthropocentric purposes without concern about damaging and harming it to the point of making it ugly and ecologically disastrous. Instead it presents itself as a harmoniously unified reality to be admired and appreciated for its beauty, and to be cared for and revered for its unfathomable cosmic and metaphysical significance. The world transfigured into an artwork is the world in which the nature and man, an actor and the object he acts upon, the animate and the inanimate all are fused together in the indivisible one. And what else could the environmental aesthetics be concerned with, cared for, and intend to achieve than these things? Artwork then must serve as the model/paradigm of the environmental aesthetics. It is for this reason that we may go farther than Oscar Wilde in parodying him that "nature must imitate art." What is required for the environmental aesthetics is then to make a Copernican revolution in our *Weltanschauung*.

III. The Philosophico-practical Implication for the Environmental Aesthetics

The world transfigured into an artwork is the ideal state of the world, not yet a reality. Thus the task of the environmental aesthetics is not descriptive but projective. The transfiguration of the world into an artwork is not the fact to be confirmed by the environmental aesthetics, but remains as its ideal, i.e., something to work on. How to begin? To begin with, what should we do? If the ideal of the environmental aesthetic can be actualized in terms of the transfiguration of the world into an artwork, and if the above description of the conditions of the transfiguration of the world into an artwork is correct, what does it imply with respect to undertaking this transfiguration? It has philosophical and practical implications.

Let us consider first the philosophical implications. The transfiguration of the world as artwork understood in terms of seeing the world as an artwork implies that we must adopt a new set of philosophical beliefs: metaphysical, epistemological and axiological, which can be collectively called '*Weltanschauung*'. Specifically in the West, for a long time, particularly since Modernity, materialistic metaphysics, positivistic epistemology and anthropocentric axiology have dominated our philosophical set of beliefs. The materialistic metaphysics sees the world/nature in terms of the mechanical system of things to be broken down into atomic entities, explainable by means of mathematical laws. The astounding success of science and scientific technology seems an unquestionable confirmation of this mechanical vision of reality. The positivistic epistemology accepts only the beliefs about reality that can be confirmed by reason understood in terms of logic and factual experience.

This is confirmed both by rationalistic and empiricistic epistemology which has prevailed from Plato to Logical Positivists via Descartes and Kant. Any belief that does not fit in this epistemological scheme is discarded as being irrational. Once again the success of scientific knowledge and technology seems to confirm the validity of this claim. The anthropocentric axiology sees value only in terms of human satisfaction. Nothing in itself has value. All values are relative to human desire.

The materialistic metaphysics and the positivistic epistemology together with the anthropocentric axiology have provided the metaphysical foundation of Faustian scientific inquiry into, and the philosophical justification for the ruthless anthropocentric exploitation of nature through scientific industrial development, with the consequences of not only aesthetically ugly, but also and more importantly ecologically deadly environment. This fact has some philosophical implications. If these consequences are undesirable, and thus must be overcome, and if they are, as it were, a logical consequence of the *Weltanschauung* as described above, the only way of overcoming the unfortunate consequences is, before anything else, to replace this *Weltanschauung* by a new one, that may be characterized as 'aesthetico-ecological'. We must change our philosophical outlook on the nature of reality, on the meaning of knowledge, and on the essence of value. But is the *Weltanschauung* consisting of the materialistic metaphysics, the positivistic epistemology and the anthropocentric axiology wrong? To be sure, reality has a material dimension, but there is no reason to believe that matter is all that there is. No doubt the material dimension is describable in terms of scientific laws, which are useful for controlling and exploiting nature, but there is no ground that scientific description of nature is only one description. Certainly human species is the most powerful animal in nature, but this does not show neither that human species is the center of the universe nor that only human species has intrinsic value nor that the egocentric human exploitation of the rest of beings in nature is justified. There is a possibility for adopting another *Weltanschauung*. Since this industrial development is rooted in, and justified by our *Weltanschauung* consisting of the instrumental conception of nature, the anthropocentric conception of man's place in the universe, and the instrumental conception of all values, the objective of the project of the environmental aesthetics in search of the restoration of the lost harmony cannot be realized without eradicating the cause of the lost harmony, namely our existing metaphysical beliefs according to which the environment/nature/world is a mere object with no intrinsic meaning and value.

It makes better sense to see the world/nature as the single organic whole which is ultimately either material nor mental/ spiritual, but something which is referred to as, for instance, Brahman in Hinduism, Tai Chi (the Ultimate Reality) in Chinese thought, not as two distinctive realities respectively called 'Idea' and phenomenon as in Plato, 'Mind and Body' as in Descartes. It is more reasonable to think that the ultimate nature of reality thus understood can be known better, as it were, aesthetically/holistically than scientifically/analytically, not though logic but intuition. It is more intelligible to think that man constitutes only one continuous nexus of the organic totality of the universe and exists on a

equal footing with all the rest as Buddhism does than to think that he is the center of the universe and thus the divine right to use the rest of beings in it for his egocentric satisfaction as Judaio Christian religion does. Then it is possible to conceive of a *Weltanschauung* definable in terms of transmaterialistic metaphysics, aesthetic epistemology and ecocentric axiology instead of materialistic metaphysics, positivistic epistemology and anthropocentric axiology. That means that the world becomes most intelligible only when it is perceived as an artwork. That is why as Nietzsche said, "(O)nly as an aesthetic product can the world be justified to all eternity"⁹⁾. If the environmental aesthetics has any philosophical foundation and guide, it is this new *Weltanschauung*, and if the project of the environmental aesthetics, i. e. transfiguration of the world into artwork is practically possible, it is only within the framework of this *Weltanschauung*.

Let us turn to the practical implications of the project of the environmental aesthetics conceived of as the transfiguration of the world into an artwork. Even when the environmental aestheticians have transfigured the world into an artwork through a radical shift in *Weltanschauung*, they may realize the need to work more on this artwork in order to shape it into an ideal form, just like an artist feels the necessity to continue to work on his canvas or sculpture or poem that he has already created because it is not yet perfect. For to say something is an artwork does not necessarily mean a good artwork.

However, what the environmental aesthetics can do with respect to his artwork is quite different from what an artist can do with respect to his artwork in three respects. First, while an artwork an artist creates and continues to work on is a particular object distinctive from all others in the world, the artwork the environmental aestheticians have transfigured from the world and continue to work on is not one particular artwork among many others, but the entire world itself. Second, although an artwork by an artist can be classified in principle into one of the genre of artwork such as painting, sculpture, music, dance, opera and so on, the world-artwork can not be done so. Third, whereas the work on a particular artwork as it is can be considered perfect without requiring any additional work on it, the work on the world-artwork is logically impossible to be considered perfect because the very notion of the environmental aesthetics presupposes that his world as an artwork is not perfect.

These facts have three different practical implications for the environmental aesthetics. The first fact implies that the project of the environmental aesthetics requires not a single or some few individual artists but a coordinated collective collaboration not only among all individual artists such as painters, sculptors, musicians but also every person in the world. From the point of view of the environmental aesthetics every human being becomes artist. In this collective artistic work on the world-artwork every individual is at once part of the artwork and creator of that work. The second fact implies that the world-artwork transcends any classification of the form of art and the artistic genre of a particular form of art, and thus comprehends all possible forms of art and all possible genres of a particular form of art into a single unnamable holistic artwork. The third facts implies that unlike an individual particular artwork, the artwork the environmental aesthetics is concerned with creating is an

9) Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.42

artwork to be worked on forever until the end of human history.

It is in this way that our reflections on the philosophical foundations of the environmental aesthetics leads us to a *Weltanschauung* that I would describe as 'artistico-ecological'. Within this *Weltanschauung*, we all are at once the constitutive parts of the world-artwork and the artists constituting that world-artwork, and the world that includes ourselves is at once an artwork already created and an artwork in the process of being created. And within this world, if there is an end of the task of the environmental aesthetics, it will coincide with the end of history of art, and if there is an end of art, it will coincide only with the end of the history of the Hegelian metaphysical odyssey.

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