



Sacha Kagan

Art and Sustainability

Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity

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SACHA KAGAN

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What is the cultural dimension of sustainability? This book offers a thought-provoking answer, with a theoretical synthesis on »cultures of sustainability«. Describing how modernity degenerated into a culture of unsustainability, to which the arts are contributing, Sacha Kagan engages us in a fundamental rethinking of our ways of knowing and seeing the world. We must learn not to be afraid of complexity, and to re-awaken a sensibility to patterns that connect. With an overview of ecological art over the past 40 years, and a discussion of art and social change, the book assesses the potential role of art in a much needed transformation process.

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SECTION 1: FROM AESTHETICS, ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS AND ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS TO AESTHETICS OF SUSTAINABILITY

The aesthetic experience according to John Dewey

John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) oriented the understanding of aesthetics towards the "aesthetic experience", beyond the classical focus on the museum-art object, and pointing at personal affectivity in everyday life. The word 'aesthetics' or 'esthetics', derives from the Greek words *aisthetikos* (sensitive) and *aisthanesthai* (to perceive, to feel).¹

The domain of 'experience' as understood by Dewey, has to do with a human being's overall interrelationship with his/her environment: "Experience is the result, the sign and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication" (Dewey 1934, p. 22).²

The aesthetic quality of experience unites meanings and values. "Whenever there is a coalescence into an immediately enjoyed qualitative unity of meanings and values drawn from previous experience and present circumstances, life then takes on an aesthetic quality—what Dewey called having 'an experience'" (Field 2005).

Aesthetic experiences can arise in everyday life, and not only in the confrontation with works of art. However, artistic expressions are especially conducive to aesthetic experience. "What distinguishes artistic creation is the relative stress laid upon the immediate enjoyment of unified qualitative complexity as the rationalizing aim of the activity itself, and the ability of the artist to achieve this aim by marshaling and refining the massive resources of human life, meanings, and values" (ibid.). Artistic creation consists in a highly reflexive activity which processes senses and emotions, not merely directly, but in the manifold attachments that they have to each other and to a variety of meanings. Because artistic creation is consisting in this emotional connection to meanings, the form of a work of art cannot be separated from its matter (and the means and ends cannot be separated either).

Furthermore, the aesthetic experience integrates the subject and the object: "no such distinction of self and object exist in it, since it is esthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears" (Dewey 1934, p. 259). And as seen in chapter 3, the non-separability of subject and object is also one of the conditions for an understanding of complexity.

1 Cf. Douglas Harper, Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com>, accessed September 13 2009.

2 The exact page numbers refer to the 2005 Perigee edition of Dewey 1934.

Aesthetic experiences have as much to do with the activities of ‘observers’ as with those of ‘creators’. Indeed, whereas an artist may realize an “art product”, it is only through the dialog between the “art product” and the observer that a “work of art” arises, “for to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience”: If the observer is “too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention to perform this work [...] his ‘appreciation’ will be a mixture of scraps of learning with conformity to norms of conventional admiration and with a confused, even if genuine, emotional excitation” (ibid., p. 56). Therefore, aesthetics has to do with the shared *and* autonomous sensibilities of human beings, producing meaningfulness. In other words: “Aesthetics as a multi-dimensional and multi-sensory opening of one’s perceptual faculties to the world meet the ‘other’ in transgressing the limits of the ‘self’ or of the ‘ego’” (Erzen 2004, p. 23).

Artistic and other creative productions are expressions opening a dialog of experiences. The aesthetic experience is not only an individual, but also a cultural phenomenon. Dewey insisted on the significance of artistic expressions as articulating the significance of life for a certain culture (i.e. for a certain society at a certain historical period). He even characterized aesthetic experience as a “manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and [...] also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization” (Dewey 1934, p. 339). For Dewey, artistic expressions reflect on what a society considers as a meaningful and satisfying life. He argued that

“instruction in the arts of life is something other than conveying information about them. It is a matter of communication and participation in values of life by means of the imagination, and works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living. Civilization is uncivil because human beings are divided into non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques” (ibid., p. 350),

i.e. because they are missing the connectedness of aesthetic experience, i.e. the “sense of the including whole” (ibid., p. 201).³

Environmental aesthetics

As Dewey already suggested, the aesthetic experience involves the apprehension of the environment. The environment is not merely a setting, but is integrated in human experience and contextualizes experience.⁴

3 Furthermore, the disassociation from everyday life of the concerns of what sociologist Howard Becker will later characterize as “art worlds”, across the 20th century, was already a source of concern for Dewey (and contributed to a ‘culture of unsustainability’ – cf. chapter 1, section 2).

4 Cf. Berleant 1992.

Dewey's understanding of aesthetics is comparable to the discourses of some contemporary philosophers of aesthetics focusing on the relationship between aesthetics and ecology: Jale Erzen, for example, defines

“an aesthetic disposition [...] as the resulting mental and sensual reaction to a corporeal relationship to the environment, which is affected through a multi-dimensional, synaesthetic perception. Perception seen this way means a constant give and take amongst all beings that dwell on the earth. This constant, intimate, direct and plural alliance amongst all things is what makes the physical processes of life on earth possible” (Erzen 2004, p. 22).

Such an understanding of the aesthetic experience calls forward a link to the natural world, and Erzen thus further argues that “aesthetics and ecology have to be understood as related in all domains” and traced back to “the basic kinship with the earth”.

The direct experience of the natural environment is however relatively distinct from the experience of a work of art: Natural environments are relating relatively differently to our aesthetic experience than do works of art, insofar as they are (up to a certain extent) not the products of human intentionality, frequently immerse us and engage multiple senses (whereas the work of art often focuses on a selected number of senses) and are often marked by spontaneity and change.⁵

Environmental aesthetics is a branch of aesthetics that studies the aesthetic appreciation of natural (and man-made) environments, and “asserts the importance of aesthetic value to discussions of our relationships with the natural world” (Brady 2003, p. 1). Emily Brady's work in this field highlights that the aesthetic experience is not merely self-oriented and hedonistic (as supposedly opposed to environmental ethics). On the contrary, “the appreciative side of aesthetic experience is active, engaged and even performative”; and in practice, “the importance of imagination and emotion to moral choice” should not be underestimated: e.g. “‘sensitivity’ and ‘attentiveness’ suggest a careful kind of perception that is a feature of both moral decision-making and attitudes and the appreciation of aesthetic qualities” (ibid., p. 255). Brady (2003) further articulates how aesthetic skills contribute to moral sensitivity and discusses the relation to ethics in aesthetics. John Dewey also discussed the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, finding their unity in what we experience and understand as being “fair” behavior (Dewey 1932, p. 275).

5 Cf. Brady 2003.

Ecological aesthetics

The expression “ecological aesthetics”⁶ has been used and developed among artists who came to be called “ecological artists”, after the example of US artists Helen and Newton Harrison, from the 1970’s onwards.⁷ One of the first typical aspects of the self-imposed ‘ecological’ constraints of ecological artists was to allow “only what could be created from materials available on site. The shaping process, a necessary characteristic of art, was not allowed to change the materials from the outset and fundamentally – transform them by adding or subtracting energy-, but only to “arrange”, in other words organize them in a new way that resisted chance. The hand of man [...] intervenes in the procedure and then leaves what emerges to “natural” events, to “metamorphosis”” (Boberg in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, p. 8). This example shows how the movement of ecological art developed the notion of ‘ecological aesthetics’ as an aesthetics that pays attention and respect to the own complex dynamics of natural phenomena in their relationships to human interventions, and that wants to highlight these aspects in the artistic working process. In other words, the ‘ecological aesthetics’ aims to highlight the form and meaningfulness of natural processes (i.e. complex processes of auto-eco-organization, if we follow Morin’s characterization). In her introduction to *Ecological Aesthetics, Art in Environmental Design: Theory and Practice*, Heike Strelow insists on the holistic integration of aesthetics and ethics:

“The perception of aesthetics on which this book is based draws on the ancient idea of aesthetics as the teaching of sensual perception and cognition (aisthesis). At the same time, aligning aesthetics in the sense of a wholistic perception with an integrative understanding of nature and culture leads to a discrete form of ‘normative’ aesthetics. On the plane of thinking and acting in terms of the environment and human ecology, ecological aesthetics links the integrated experience of the world with ethical criteria defined in terms of the humanistic tradition” (Strelow in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, pp. 10-11).

Ecological aesthetics also qualifies as a “sensitivity to the pattern which connects” (to be discussed below), as it is “inseparably linked with the idea that ultimately everything, nature and culture as well, and thus man and his habitat, are connected in an infinite, diverse systems of relationships” (Stre-

6 The expression “ecological aesthetics” has also been used in other contexts. For example, it is in use in the psychology of perception (cf. ed. Landwehr 1990) but that approach is largely irrelevant to the focus of my current research.

7 I will introduce ecological art in chapter 5. For the moment, I merely approach the notion of “ecological aesthetics”.

low in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, p. 11).⁸ This idea emerged together with the ecological movement of the late 20th century, and allowed to move beyond a Romantic dichotomy between a pristine nature and an extra-natural human culture, and the Modern opposition between primitive nature and civilized culture: “In the course of the growing ecological understanding that did not start until the late sixties, man came to perceive himself as an integral part of a set of connected, natural and cultural eco-systems, and thus also part of the nature surrounding him” (ibid.). Strelow locates the emergence of this idea in art in the movement from “Land Art” to “Art in Nature”: indeed the latter, unlike the former, “do not just seek stimulus from nature, but build her as a partner, as their fellow creator”. Ecological aesthetics points at “the traces of this interpenetration of nature and culture” (ibid., p. 12).

I shall remark, however, that one can find some premises of this awareness that arose in the 1960’s, already in earlier writings from individual modern artists: For example, in the early 20th century, Paul Klee noted: “For the artist communication with nature remains the most essential condition. The artist is human; himself nature; part of nature within natural space” (quoted in Haley 2008, p. 202).

Because ecological aesthetics thus deals with multi-layered systems of relationships, a superficial parallel can be made with Nicolas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics”, in the stimulation of visitors participation.⁹ Bourriaud also argued that “nothing (no art) will be possible without the deep ecological transformation of subjectivities, without the awareness of the interdependencies on which subjectivity is based” (Bourriaud quoted in Erzen 2004). However, unlike ecological aesthetics, relational aesthetics limits itself to a superficial participative spectacle with no or little reflexivity.

Because culture is part of nature, “within art, an ‘ecological aesthetic’ would be a reflexive, socially and environmentally shaping activity”, argues Herman Prigann (in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, p. 111), who further characterizes ecological aesthetics as an “aesthetic of integration” by contrast to the former “aesthetic of exclusion towards nature, excluding it as something external, something material, something understood as a resource” (ibid., p. 113). However, this should not be confused with an aesthetics of confusion (i.e. a holistic simplification), as Jacques Leenhardt’s response to Prigann suggests.¹⁰

8 The original text speaks literally of “an infinite [...] systems”, leaving the reader wondering whether Strelow speaks here of one system or of plural systems.

9 The parallel is explicitly made by Erzen 2004, p. 24.

10 Alas, instead of warning against an aesthetics of confusion (as I explicitly do here), Leenhardt falls into a binary dichotomy between differentiation-specialization on the one hand, and a Romantic fusion and de-differentiation/de-specialization on the other hand (cf. Leenhardt in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, p. 113). This is probably due to the fact that Leenhardt is here not us-

Timothy Collins suggests “that the aesthetics of ecology are revealed through the perception and understanding of the physical characteristics of diversity” (Collins in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, p. 170), with effective change emerging from diversity rather than from “primary authorship or the exclusive manifestos of modernist practice” as was attempted at in artistic avant-gardes. Collins further points at the ecological value of biological and social /cultural diversity as “a complex interrelationship of diversities” (ibid., p. 172), i.e. its value for resilience, which Collins metaphorically understands as an issue of health: “a lack of health can be described in terms of emergent dominant systems that mitigate or constrain diversity”.

Strelow mentions “interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity” as typical features of art projects based on ecological aesthetics.¹¹ “Connecting things separate spatially and intellectually, in other words transdisciplinary thinking and acting, are essential for conceiving and realizing these projects” (Strelow in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, pp. 12-13). The project interdisciplinarity also involves bottom-up political participation by communities, or at least their approval and legitimation: In this sense, Strelow also argues that ecological artists, who are “initiating, promoting and presenting these processes”, are thus becoming “catalysts for social transformation processes. They mediate between various pressure groups and disciplines” (ibid., p. 13). This also points at another feature of ecological aesthetics in such projects: It is “aimed at practicality” and founds a concretely transformative, i.e. transform-active artistic practice.

A further feature stemming from the ‘expanded concept of art’ initiated by Joseph Beuys (and in opposition to historical avant-gardes) is, according to Jacques Leenhardt, that by moving away from museum art, such art projects “involve [themselves] once more in all the dangers emanating from uncertain spaces like the street, from nature, from opaque human situations [and thereby] rediscover less theoretical, more directly human aspects of existence in which the complexity of ideas and gestures finally achieves its full identity, its full density” (Leenhardt in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, p. 112). As Morin indeed pointed out, the understanding of complexity, in nature and in human society, requires such an openness to uncertainties and to the agitations of disorders outside the organized fields of art

ing macro-concepts, and does not clearly envision a dialogical alternative (as e.g. Morin would do: Cf. Morin 1980, pp. 327-328) and thus remains captive of the binary tension he describes.

11 However, even though she uses the word repeatedly, Strelow only succinctly defines transdisciplinarity as “a research approach that defines problems independently of any discipline” and as “a further development of interdisciplinarity” (Strelow in eds. Strelow, Prigann and David 2004, p. 15) - for a more thorough approach to transdisciplinarity, see my earlier developments in chapter 3 and my forthcoming discussion below in this chapter.

worlds. Leenhardt is explicitly pointing at the “ecological idea” for its introduction of “complexity and the interaction of causalities [into] the circle of artistic disciplines, whose unduly confined framework it opens up”: In other words, he argues that the ecological idea, as in ‘ecological aesthetics’, offers to the art worlds the opportunity to leave the orbit of the ‘culture of unsustainability’ (as discussed in chapter 1).

But this opportunity does not come without challenges: Leenhardt, in his discussion of the insights of the “ecological idea” to art, warns about the consequences of such insights for artistic practices and the kind of aesthetic experiences that are to be expected: These can no longer be limited to merely local objects and relations, but must relate them to wider contexts: “the new interest in complex causalities leads to increased attention to global connections rather than spatially limited situations that cannot carry the real driving forces of the phenomena within them. [...] Objects of ecological aesthetics are not permitted small frames of reference” (ibid.). This requirement further qualifies ecological aesthetics as a “sensibility to the pattern which connects”.

Towards aesthetics of sustainability

The notion of a sensibility to connectedness was central in Gregory Bateson’s understanding of aesthetics. Based on Bateson’s aesthetics, which I will now introduce and discuss, I will further elaborate an understanding of “aesthetics of sustainability”. This very expression has already been used by Hildegard Kurt in the past decade, but in a different way, which I will discuss in chapter 6 (I will also discuss in chapter 6, the expression “sustainable art” as introduced by Maja and Reuben Fowkes). But for now, it suffices to say that my use of the expression does not borrow from their precedents.

SECTION 2: FROM BATESON’S SENSIBILITY TO THE PATTERN WHICH CONNECTS, TO A SENSIBILITY TO PATTERNS THAT CONNECT

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson, one of the founders of cybernetics and systems sciences in the decades following the second world war, understood early on that “there is an increasing necessity for an awareness of being part of relational contexts [...]: persons, groups, populations, genders, species” (Foreword by Sergio Manghi in Bateson 1979, p. xii). Bateson perceived that necessity as the need for a major cultural shift. “His interest was in addressing the very way we think about issues. [...] Bateson was after the very principles of organization that informed the thinking of our culture as a whole. [...] Bateson was engaged in what, again following Edgar Morin, we might now call transdisciplinary work, whose nature it is not merely to cross