When I first reflected on the title of this symposium, I thought it could be read as an invitation to critique the academic practice of aesthetics as a scholarly discipline, to identify its limitations, its subservience to fashionable academic ideologies, its alienation from much of what was (and is) being done by artists of all sorts and traditions, past as well as present. Such a critique would serve a useful purpose, certainly, but its value would have been largely negative and might have induced the imaginative format of this symposium to descend to the level of intellectual bickering reminiscent of philosophy conferences.

At the same time, the title of this symposium is suggestive, perhaps too suggestive, for questioning aesthetics can mean several different things. One, perhaps the most obvious, is raising questions about the field of aesthetics. What issues should aesthetics be concerned with? What values does aesthetics center around and how does their relevance vary? Where does aesthetics belong in the domain of scholarship? What kind of theoretical account best captures the workings of the aesthetic? Questioning aesthetics here means questioning the discipline, surely a purgative process that is useful for any discipline.

But there is another meaning, an adjectival meaning, in questioning aesthetics. It is to consider aesthetics as an inquiry that questions by its very nature, a questioning-aesthetics, aesthetics as a distinctive kind of questioning: aesthetic questioning. What is the particular character of the aesthetic that places things in question? How does
aesthetics question? What kind of questioning is it that aesthetics is especially capable of doing? It is, I think, a questioning that judges by an aesthetic standard; that is, it starts from sensible experience and evaluates things by perceptual criteria. Of what, specifically, is aesthetics an appropriate critique? Here its scope is boundless, and aesthetics quickly becomes a critique of the human world, of its institutions, its practices, its justices and injustices, its sense of things on the basis of the perceptual conditions they inhabit and promote. What might such a critique reveal? Where might it lead if aesthetics became the questioner? What is an aesthetics that questions?

This adjectival meaning assigns a critical function to aesthetics; it suggests that aesthetics can be the basis of a social or a political critique in evaluating practices by their consequences for the sensible world of human life. There is an implicit humanism here, for the qualitative, perceptual richness of experience becomes the standard of judgment. In a sense, these two meanings of "questioning aesthetics" may be inseparable because a questioning-aesthetics suggests an answer to the question of what aesthetics is.

Lest this seem too convoluted, let me suggest how the questioning of and by aesthetics relates to the subject of this first session: environmental engagement and sustainability. Both engagement and sustainability embody ethical concerns, the first about the contribution of aesthetic experience to the quality of living, and the second about ways of life that sustain a balance between production and consumption, a balance that is increasingly fractured and threatened to the point of rendering the future of human life precarious. Our faith in a technological fix for the ills of excess has reached the blank wall of impossibility when exhausted resources cannot be
replenished and environmental changes cannot be reversed. We are facing the fact that we cannot insulate ourselves from the consequences of unrestrained environmental consumption and careless depredation. The fact is that we have become consumers of environment and are obliterating the very ground of our sustenance. Hence the inescapable criterion of sustainability, which implies a concern for attending to the aesthetic values inherent in the survival of civilizations that are necessarily human and morally humane. Indeed, the very subject of survival requires a concern for environment, just as the survival of human civilization requires safeguarding aesthetic values.

This suggests an answer to where we began in questioning aesthetics, and for several reasons. One is that it challenges the tradition that confines aesthetic value to natural beauty and the arts. Environment is more than striking scenery and accommodating landscape design. It denotes a contextual condition that implicates and includes the human percipient. Environment is a collective term for the multiple settings of human life activity in their dystopic manifestations as well as in their benign ones. Environment is not an external, distant object or phenomenon. And the arts are more than objects and occasions for delectation since they enter into the very substance of human life experience. Both the arts and environment are conditions of aesthetic engagement. So the second form of aesthetic questioning, a questioning-aesthetics, introduces the need for normative criteria. It invites us to identify in the range of aesthetic perception values are negative and harmful in environmental experience and those aesthetic values that enlarge and enrich our life experiences and lead us into harmony with the world we create and inhabit.
Thus a questioning aesthetics gives aesthetic values and concerns central importance, for the ubiquity of aesthetic perception implicates the full range of normative experience. And the normative question introduces issues concerning the negative domains of aesthetics and the necessity for aesthetic criticism of environmental experience. A questioning aesthetics is therefore fundamental, for it promotes inquiry grounded on and in our perceptual world. When aesthetics questions, everything responds. I expect we shall hear some of these answers these two days.

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