THE AESTHETICS OF THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

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The interest in environmental aesthetic that politicians and conservationists have recently been showing seems clear in its intent. It appears to be a belated yet important effort to save the values of our natural world from final exploitation and the irrevocable disfigurement and 1088 that must follow. If it is to result in more than a program for removing billboards and hiding junkyards, this concern with environment should be seen as a cue for the artist and the aesthetician to develop images, concepts, and principles that will articulate and rationalize the convictions that have produced these efforts. It may, however, seem as though to do this requires an act of philosophical creation \textit{ex nihilo}, for philosophers have never devoted much attention to such questions, and with the exception of a few thinkers like Kant, Ruskin, and Santayana, they have indeed ignored the aesthetics of nature altogether. At most, aesthetics has turned to nature for inspiration or as a model for emulation, but never as an occasion for perceptual experience analogous to the experience of art.

While this may be a new problem for philosophers, it is nothing unusual for many contemporary artists, and a number of the arts have moved in recent decade towards an involvement with just such interests, as in the case of assemblages, environments, Happenings, and earth sculpture. Moreover, some of the arts have always handled features that bear directly on such problems. In some fashion both painting and sculpture employ perceptual dimensions that refine the natural experience rather than substitute it. Sculptural space and volume stand amid natural space and volume, sometimes literally so, and sculpture's shapes, textures, and lighting often have a direct source in the forms, surfaces, and light of natural objects, materials, and locations. So too does painting open a range of space, light, and color. There is a continuity between the pictorial landscape and the real one, not a relation between original and copy but a shared aspect, as when distance in perspective begins with the eye of the viewer, both inhabiting the same space. In daily life, too, a way of looking is opened to us which we carry to the objects of daily life that surround us, and, in the portrait we learn to see people we have always looked at.
Even when they develop toward greater abstraction, these arts continue to act as models for experiencing the world which lies outside the frame and the museum. Much the same kinds of perceptual dimensions of space, color, line, form, composition and texture persist as outward appearances lose their resemblance.

However, a tradition has unfortunately developed which, under the influence of a cognitive ideal and art's search for its own identity and independence has led to a stress on the difference between the attitude we take toward art and the one we assume toward our ordinary human environment. Thus, the aesthetic attitude has been described as contemplative, passive, disinterested, wholly removed from the dynamic engagement which fills our usual relationships with our surroundings.

Here is where recent developments in the arts serve to challenge this aesthetic aloofness and bring art back into juxtaposition with the objects and conditions of our world. Consider what they have done: In pop art, *Objets trouvés*, and Happenings the arts have plucked images, materials, and situations out of the commercial and industrial world of everyday affairs and have held them before us, not to contemplate disinterestedly but to respond to. In optical art and kinetic sculpture the arts have disrupted the passive ease of appreciation by prodding us into cooperative action. Erotic themes have joined political ones to make the visual and dramatic arts occasions of involvement and not of simple observation. In music, dance, and film the qualities of appreciative engagement that have always been present axe excited more and more until they can no longer be disregarded in any attempt to describe what happens.

Yet this recognition of the participatory response enables us to look back at the traditional arts to find it present all along. The troublesome case of architecture, which is unable to divest of functionalism and social utility, turns out to be not only a model for conceptualizing the fine arts but a portal through which the practical arts, conveniently declassed by tradition, can finally enter. The continuity between the creative activity, skill, and purpose of production and the completeness of the finished art object appears in painting, sculpture and poetry no less than in architecture and design. Humanistic function, an integration into the matrix of man's needs, activities, and goals of both creation and use, now embraces all the arts.

The important point here is to consider what sorts of concepts must emerge from the newly realized condition of the arts, for it is our contention that this condition suggests implications for the broadest context of aesthetic experience - the human environment. Perhaps the most striking condition, one that the new arts are almost universal in insisting on, is the affirmation of the continuity of the activities and objects of art with those of life. This takes many diverse forms, from the ready employment of industrial and commercial materials, images, and themes, as well as those of daily life, to the quantity, precision, and expendability which are possible only through industrial production. On the experiential side, the continuity takes the form of an engagement with the art object to an extent that denies the traditional accounts of distance and contemplation. This is reminiscent of the magical awe with which primitive man
viewed nature, an awe which accounts for the sense of a certain mystery and power which invariably grips us when we come under the spell of art. Allied with this continuity and engagement is the new dynamic character of art, shifting the deceptively static condition of art to a vital, almost disquietingly active role. From an object which moves before us, as in kinetic sculpture, which surrounds us, as in environments, which twists our eye in futile attempts at conforming, as in optical art, which reflects our startles faces in mirrors and polished surfaces, to the moving, feeling, stimulation action with which the appreciator acts upon the object, there is a vital engagement of perceiver and art object. Third and most inclusive is the pervasive functionalism which has to be seen, not in the form of a narrow, barren utility but rather in its broadest sense as an active interchange of man and object. As an object whose qualities and significance have no place beyond human experience and as an object which focuses on the immediacy of the human world, the work of art provides the fullest condition and the most complete model for living.

These three features of the new aesthetics - the continuity between art and life, the dynamic character of art, and the humanistic functionalism of the aesthetic act - suggest a conceptual framework that goes far beyond conventionalism, and in doing so, they offer the possibility, not of aesthetic experience diluted by past recognition, but rather of a basis for opening the world to full perceptual awareness and significance. It supplies a theoretical vision whose implications are not only aesthetic but moral and political as well.

There are a number of interesting possibilities for applying such concepts, since their broad nature makes us able to put them to more than conventional aesthetic situations. Indeed, these ideas are highly suggestive devices for dealing with occasions that appear to exceed traditional limits and for which the traditional views are not only helpless but misleading. The environment is one such situation, whether it be the natural environment or the man-made one. There is, for example, a sunrise or sunset where the horizon is unobstructed, the most spectacular light show ever observed. There is the medieval cathedral, a total physical and social environment that brings together not most of the arts but that engages all the senses. There is the sailing ship, that artifact which combines the most perfect functionalism with great beauty of object and total engagement in a thoroughly sensory-utilitarian environment. There is the circus, a highly charged world of fantasy and adventure which surrounds us with an environment thick with sound, sight, and movement, a dream world of the grotesque, the dangerous, the magical.

There is yet another environment, the urban region, about which slightly more must be said even within the limits of this brief essay. The urban region is the setting of both total life and total art, the matrix within which all human experiences take place. It is the focus of the practical activities of work, of family, of education, of commerce, and of the aesthetic activities of art, culture, and sociality. These, however, are not always separable, and following the lead of the arts become most successful when most fully continuous and integrated with each other. If we view this environment as an aesthetic object, we can see, perhaps in the manner of Dubuffet's aerial landscapes, arrangements of space, of mass and
volume, geographical contours, lines demarcating neighborhoods, transportation arteries, green areas of trees and parks, the polychromy of houses and buildings, the reflections of lakes and fountains, textures of land and structures and much more. But the region is a dynamic environment of human activity, the setting for patterns of social movement and congregation in work and play, in ritual and romance, a kinetic sculpture in which social man is the \textit{fons et origo} of movement. Finally, it is through a dynamic synthesis of the practical and the aesthetic, where need and awareness are equally fulfilled, that function is both most complete and most humane, and where enlightened aesthetic judgment can become a social instrument toward a moral goal.