

ECOAESTHETICS: ART BEYOND ART

A Manifesto for the 21st Century

Art today is trapped in the facile idea of the individual ‘freedom of expression’ that merely produces the banality of media scandals and sensationalism, widening the gap further between art and life in which art now operates purely as a commodity. The tremendous success of the artist today has in fact inflated the artist’s narcissist ego (hereafter narego) further and turned him or her into a celebrity which can entertain the public spectacularly but without any transformational function.

All this has in fact been due to the failure of the historical avant-garde. This failure was not inherent in the ideas of the avant-garde themselves, but the way the criticality of the avant-garde was appropriated by the very forces it wanted to confront and change. The potential of the avant-garde to intervene in life and transform it is still there. But it must first liberate itself from the artist’s narego, and also from where this ego leads art to: the bourgeois art institution. Art must now go beyond the making of mere objects that are displayable in the museum or/and sold as precious commodities at the market place. Only then it can enter the world of everyday life and its collective energy that is struggling not only to improve life itself but to save it from its impending destruction on earth.

Historically, the struggle of the avant-garde was of course to integrate art with life, to find ways by which individual creative processes could enter life’s own dynamic processes and become part of it. But it was only during the Land art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s that what emerged, though paradoxically, as both a Concept and Form, from abandoning the making of objects in favour of art as concepts, should now pay the way forward. Thanks to Duchamp, but art now went beyond his object making and became engaged with the land or the earth itself – indeed, a dynamic reversal of the readymade.

The land had always been an object of the artist’s gaze, but this time the gaze did not produce landscape painting. On the contrary, the conception of land as art itself became the artwork. This was achieved by intervening in the land and transforming it as something that continued to remain part of the land, either as a stationary object or what would transform itself continually. But, again, what should have become part of the living process of the productive land ended up in the museums as photographic artworks to be looked at as objects of gaze

Some ten years later, Joseph Beuys tried to resolve this difficult paradox by suggesting that his work of planting trees (Kassel, 1982), could in fact become part of people’s everyday work. It offered a social

model for the transformative power of art, but his proposal of planting trees also failed to go beyond the idea of art legitimised and contained by the bourgeois art institution. And although Beuys' this work opened a new space for art to move forward, it failed to resolve the problem of art trapped within both the artist's narego and the institution that will not allow art to become part of the collectivity of life.

However, although such radical ideas of the avant-garde failed as they were legitimised and contained within the individualism of artists, the ideas themselves are still there to be taken out of their institutional closures. The ideas were of course appropriated and their true significance aborted, turning them into institutionally manageable objects and frozen in their temporalities. But ideas as knowledge can never be frozen or trapped, either as the absolute property of an individual or the institution. They can always be salvaged from history, given new context and make them move forward within the dynamic of new time and space. They can indeed be made to perform radically a transformative function in dealing with the problem of humanity today and of the 21st century.

But in order to perform this function, the very concept of art will have to liberate itself from the narcissist ego of the artist, its institutional legitimation as art which facilitates and promotes art only as saleable commodities and then turn them into reified objects placed in its museum showcases. Art must then go beyond what prevails as art and integrate itself with the collective struggle of life today to recover its true social function; and, indeed, to become a radical force of the 21st century.

A piece of land can now be conceived not merely as a conceptual artwork but this concept can be taken beyond its becoming a canonised object and integrated into an ongoing, self-sustaining dynamic process with a movement generated within itself, by its own agency that thus legitimises itself. This agency is not of an individual, who might have initiated the idea of land as art, but the *collective work* of those who work on the land. It is this collective work of the masses, not of nature as perceived by the American land artists Smithson and Morris, which continually transforms the land, producing an agency which is not only creatively productive but posits a progressive idea, philosophically, towards the solution of the problem the world is facing today and will continue to face in the 21st century.

The phenomenon of climate change can be studied by scientists in their ivory towers, but the reality of its disturbing consequences is faced by all the life on earth. The solution to this problem lies not in the theories of the academics but the productive creativity of the people themselves, which can be enhanced through the intervention of an *artistic imagination*. What the world now needs are rivers and lakes of clean water, collective farms and planting of trees all over the world – which

was in fact initiated in Kenya by the winner of Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, Wangari Maathai, a few years before Beuys' proposal, as a result of which millions of trees have been planted all over the world. The aim of *Ecoaesthetics* is to bring both Maathai's and Beuys' visions together, in a unison that fills the gap between art and life – which the avant-garde had failed to do.

Although it is extremely important to protect existing rain forests, they will not alone reduce the greenhouse effects in the atmosphere. Only planting of more trees can achieve this, for which enormous water would be required. This can be achieved by conceptualising the process of desalination of sea water as an ongoing continuous artwork, with its own dynamics and agency. The establishment of desalination plants around the world – which can be millions – may not make much difference to the sea level, but it can provide enormous quantity of water not only for the cultivation of land but also to fulfil all other needs of life on earth.

Desalination of sea water as art is based on its potential to transform things. It comprises a complex cycle of continuous transformations of sun's energy; which when brought in contact with water becomes steam that runs desalination plants to produce fresh water, which when fertilises the earth produces trees and plants.

This phenomenon actually happens in nature. But when it is replicated through the combination of art, science and technology, its controlled results enhance the very phenomenon of nature that is replicated. The role of artistic imagination here is to think, initiate and create not what is self-consuming by the ego from which the idea emerges, but what can transcend and transgress nature and becomes part of the collective energy of the earth and transforms it in such a way that this transformation not only enhances the natural potential of the earth itself but also the collective creativity of the life of all its inhabitants – humans, animals, plants, insects, and so on.

The idea of desalination is not just a conceptual artwork, but can be realised materially; it is also meant to be an example of the broader conceptual framework from which many more ideas and projects can emerge in the future.

Art must, ultimately, liberate itself from the romanticism of anarchic confrontation, from the prison of facile irony (Baudrillard), from the regimes of representation (Ranciere/ Deleuze), in order to become a continuous movement in life's natural processes as part of its collective cultural endeavours to become more humane and truly egalitarian.

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