

ESSAY

Redefining Beauty within the Context of Sustainability

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“When I am working on a problem I never think about beauty. I only think about how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.”

—Buckminster Fuller¹

On the face of it, LAGI’s byline “Renewable Energy Can Be Beautiful” is self-evident. Why should we settle for a concrete block power plant or a looming and noisy wind turbine, when an artist, designer, or architect can transform its appearance to make it more palatable? This especially holds true, as LAGI’s originators point out, if power generation is decentralized and is literally in your or my backyard. Taking a second look, however, perhaps LAGI’s proclamation presents a challenge: that we reconsider beauty within the context of a truly sustainable society, one that respects and works with nature. This brief essay embraces this challenge with the intent to raise more questions than provide answers, and to incite a conversation.

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

To begin, let’s define that much overused and little understood term, sustainability. Initially, the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations on March 20, 1987 defined sustainable development as “development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”² Twenty-five years later, the web site of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency states: “Sustainability creates and maintains the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations.”³ What seems glaringly apparent in these definitions is their underlying anthropocentrism and their failure to illuminate the nature of sustainability: How can we sustain life, let alone make it thrive, not only for humanity but for the life and living systems on which we and non-human others depend?

Physicists Fritjof Capra and Vandana Shiva both emphasize that life is inherently self-organizing and regenerative.⁴ Life will regenerate if its ability to do so is not compromised. It is this ability to self-organize and regenerate that is at the heart of sustainability; it is what makes living systems sustainable: “Ecoliteracy—the understanding of the principles of organization that ecosystems have evolved to sustain the web of life—is the first step on the road to sustainability.”⁵ We can find numerous examples today of how this ability has been thwarted by human actions, such as oceans choked with plastic, threatening their ability to sustain marine life. If we envision non-human nature as comprised of living worlds and systems, as relationships rather than inanimate objects to consume, then perhaps we can feel both empathy and shame for how we, often unknowingly or unconsciously, are depriving non-human others of their ability to sustain their lives and their worlds. Designer William McDonough offers a more ecocentric definition of sustainability while critiquing the Brundtland Commission: “In its original context, this definition was stated solely from the human point of view. In order to embrace the idea of a global ecology with intrinsic value, the meaning must be expanded to allow all parts of nature to meet their own needs now and in the future.”⁶

DEFINING AND CONTESTING BEAUTY

Prior to the 19th century, beauty was thought to be inherent in the object of admiration—a set of ideals that were independent of the maker or the viewer. Romanticism, embraced by the Hudson River School painters, proclaimed beauty as relative—dependent on the maker, the viewer, and the cultural context. Along with beauty as a more subjective and personal experience, was the idea of the

sublime—an experience of nature that was both exhilarating in its scale and power, and humbling in its lack of regard for humans. Whether beauty was considered objective, subjective, or sublime, it remained the primary focus of art until the 20th century.

It is widely acknowledged that Dada, and Marcel Duchamp in particular, freed art from the shackles of beauty. Confronted with the atrocities of World War I, Dadaists deliberately responded with irony and chaos, echoing the madness of war. Duchamp went further: he submitted a urinal turned 90 degrees, so that it rested on its back, to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition in 1917. He signed it R. Mutt, the name of the manufacturer, as an artist would sign a painting, declaring this product art. As Duchamp stated, “My idea was to choose an object that wouldn’t attract me, either by its beauty or by its ugliness. To find a point of indifference in my looking at it, you see.”⁷

The Fountain, as the urinal was titled, and Duchamp’s “readymades” opened the floodgates to create art that was ugly, banal, shocking, ridiculous, kitsch, or trite. If an artist canned and displayed his feces in a museum, then it was art. Anything could be art. This was hugely liberating and necessary. But as is often the case in art and life, this trajectory eventually reached an endpoint. In the process of freeing art from the confines of beauty and good taste, beauty became suspect. Artists who stubbornly insisted upon the validity of beauty and its mysteries were marginalized. The mandate that art must be beautiful was replaced with the prohibition that it could not be.

In the anti-establishment decade of the 1960s, Land Artists contested the sanctioned materials and methods of art-making while breaking out of the “white box” of gallery and museum

exhibitions. Walter de Maria’s *Lightning Field*, located in a desolate area of New Mexico, called lightning down from the heavens for those patient enough to wait. De Maria’s carefully constructed grid of 400 aluminum rods asserted the control and rationality of man while the lightning itself evoked nature’s sublime fury and force. Was Land Art a demonstration of the glory of nature’s power or man’s power over it, as these artists etched their heroic marks into the earth?

In contrast to sculpting the land with questionable regard for the ecosystems disrupted, several artists of this period foregrounded the inner workings of nature by revealing its celestial systems (Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels*) and growth processes (Alan Sonfist, *Time Landscape*; Hans Haake, *Grass Grows*; Helen Meyer and Newton Harrison, *Hog Pasture: Survival Piece #1*). “Nature was no longer captured in an eternal moment through static paintings but interpreted as alive and constantly changing through an art that mirrors its cycles and rhythms.”⁸ These “ecoart pioneers”⁹ initiated an international art movement that, unlike the Land Artists of the 1960s, claimed sustainability as their rallying cry.

THE BEAUTY OF SUSTAINABILITY

Our civilization has been built on non-renewable resources and an outmoded presumption that nature is limitless. Certainly art will continue to serve many purposes; however, for artists and designers who choose to engage in what Joanna Macy terms *The Great Turning*, what is the role of beauty?

In *The Madonna of the Future*, Arthur Danto states that the Hudson River School artists did not distinguish between artistic and natural beauty. They were not merely representing nature,

- ¹ “Richard Buckminster Fuller Quotes.” *Goodreads*. Goodreads, Inc. Jan. 2007. Web. 22 Nov. 2012.
- ² “Sustainable Development – Concept and Action.” United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. UNECE. n.d. Web. 4 Jan. 2013
- ³ “What is Sustainability?” U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. USEPA. n.d. Web. 23 Nov. 2012.
- ⁴ See Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999).
- ⁵ Fritjof Capra, *The Hidden Connections* (New York: Random House, 2002), 232-33.
- ⁶ William McDonough, *The Hannover Principles: Design for Sustainability*. New York: William McDonough Architects, 1992. 4.
- ⁷ Marcel Duchamp. “Duchamp Interviews.” BBC TV, 1966. Web. 14 Nov. 2012. See <http://www.youtube.com>.
- ⁸ Barbara Matilski, *Fragile Ecologies* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, Rizzoli International, 1992), 38.
- ⁹ See Linda Weintraub, *To Life: Ecoart in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
- ¹⁰ Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 337.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ James Hillman, “The Practice of Beauty,” *Uncontrollable Beauty*. Ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 1998), 264.

they were depicting “nature in such a way that the viewer would be enough stirred by the beauty of the scene to feel it a medium for divine communications.”¹⁰ Danto argues that contemporary art cannot do likewise because the Hudson River School “delivered the kinds of meanings nature itself did *when it was beautiful*” (italics mine).¹¹ In discussing the work of Mark Rothko, Danto states, “in painting after painting, [they] served to intimate meanings of a spiritual order *no longer to be found in nature*. It was as if art had taken over a task *we no longer looked to nature to perform*” (italics mine).¹² In other words, since we seemingly have arrived at “the end of nature” to use Bill McKibben’s words, we cannot access the spiritual meanings nature once conferred, nor express those meanings through beauty. Psychologist James Hillman would argue otherwise, as would many ecoartists working today: “...below the ecological crisis lies the deeper crisis of love, that love has left our world. That the world is loveless results directly from the repression of beauty, its beauty and our sensitivity to beauty. For love to return to the world, beauty must first return, else we love the world only as a moral duty: Clean it up, preserve its nature, exploit it less.”¹³ To give up on beauty, as Danto seems to have done, is to give up on nature and ultimately on life itself. The spiritual in beauty and nature rests in the promise that nature, though wounded, is still sublime, still greater than our imaginings, still larger than our selves. Without such faith, we risk assuming that we have conquered nature, which gives us license to exploit it further.

As much as we (hopefully) are offended by swaths of forests laid bare and mountains denied of their pinnacles, these offenses to our sense of beauty and rightness are the first warnings of a deeper dis-ease—the disruption and perhaps eradication of worlds and

relationships unseen, the unraveling of the web of life. This web is not mere metaphor but reality, as David Suzuki so eloquently recounts in his recent book, *The Legacy*. In a radio interview, he describes how, fairly recently, it was discovered that when bears leave the carcasses of salmon in the forest they are fertilizing the soil and nourishing the trees: “So we know the salmon needs the forest, now we know the forest needs the salmon. So you see this beautiful system where the ocean is connected through the salmon to the forest, and the birds from South America are connected to the northern hemisphere.”¹⁴

Non-human nature offers stunning, wild, exquisite, excessive beauty: beauty of form, color, texture, and pattern; beauty of economy, elegance, relationship, and interconnection. It is our limited, dichotomous thinking that severs form from function, artistic from natural beauty, reason from sensuality. In nature, no such separation exists. Form does not follow function, it is function and vice versa as Buckminster Fuller’s quote, which opened this essay, implies. We may not always understand how form and function co-exist, but if we are to embrace the miracle and intelligence of evolution, we must assume the necessity for beauty for the continuance and sustainability of life.

“...from the perspective of sustainability, nature’s ‘design’ and ‘technologies’...were created and have been continually refined over billions of years of evolution, during which the inhabitants of the Earth household flourished and diversified without ever using up their natural capital...”¹⁵

¹⁴ David Suzuki. Interview by Steve Curwood. "The Legacy of David Suzuki." *Living on Earth*, PRI Environmental News Magazine, 2010. Web. 23 Nov. 2012.

¹⁵ Fritjof Capra, *The Hidden Connections* (New York: Random House, 2002), 233.

¹⁶ See Sue Spaid. *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* (Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2002). See also online: <http://www.greenmuseum.org/c/ecovention/sect1.html>.

¹⁷ Bruce Mau, "What is Massive Change?" Bruce Mau Design and Institute Without Boundaries, 2006. Web. 18 Nov. 2012.

The most effective art of any genre engaged in the project of *The Great Turning* reveals the exquisite systems and relationships beneath the surface and engenders empathy for and connection to them, whether that is through large-scale projects that clean water or generate renewable energy, or whether it is through more interpretive or poetic works that invite us to contemplate how we see nature and how we might view it differently. This vast and infinite conversation of which ecoartists Helen Meyer and Newton Harrison speak is the deeper beauty that artists throughout the centuries have been called to reveal and protect, from the cave paintings at Lascaux to LAGI. LAGI and similar "ecoventions"¹⁶ offer an intelligent beauty that is both externally elegant and internally complex, one that appeals to both the mind and heart, to reason and the senses. Marrying the most advanced renewable energy technologies to the beauty of both form and function, LAGI fulfills designer Bruce Mau's pronouncement: "Massive change is not about the world of design but the design of the world."¹⁷