

УДК 7.036

## **Environmentalism Aesthetic Aspects: Ecology and Modern Art**

**Yuriy V. Sobolev\***

*Siberian State Technological University  
82 Mira, Krasnoyarsk, 660049 Russia*

Received 18.11.2012, received in revised form 21.01.2013, accepted 03.11.2013

---

*In the present paper the author considers the problems of ecology and modern art in the context of environmentalism aesthetics. Through nominal logical analysis, applying historic and semiotic methods to the field of an examined problem the author identifies the main aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the correlation between a current position of ecology and artwork. In the process of achieving the major goal, which is stating the place of “aesthetic junction” in the context of ecologic artistic discourse, the author consequently does the following: defines a place of ecologic range of problems in a historic philosophical context; clarifies the main approaches to the given problem in foreign and homeland traditions; outlines possible ways for correct entering the modern environmental aesthetics. Theoretical material of the paper can be used in the courses of aesthetics, culturology and study of art.*

*Keywords: aesthetics, environmentalism, ecology, modern art, culture.*

---

Understanding environmental issues within the discursive field of the philosophical tradition is a relatively new phenomenon; today ecology is seen mainly as one in a general range of contemporary global issues (in particular, as one of critical problems in history and philosophy of science). This is one of the reasons why a philosophical view on the ecological state of the modern world is becoming a habitual fixation and statement of the common (already time-honoured) idea that a human destroys the world. Against this background, it seems as if a utopian anachronism to retain the pathos of modern European philosophy era, expressed in the famous idea of Francis Bacon about overcoming nature with the help of technical advances. However,

already in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the problem of man and world relationships became a subject to interpretation for such scholars as E. Mach, P. Teilhard de Chardin, V.I. Vernadsky (Vernadsky, 1991). Later came the theory of “deep ecology” (1973) by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss. The essence of deep ecology, which questions the “basic principles of our society” (Næss), is to avoid the limitations of methodological framework of modern science. (For example, another representative of this direction – W. Fox – suggested renaming deep ecology into transpersonal ecology as a certain symbiosis of deep ecology with the eastern spiritual knowledge and experience of European philosophical psychology). So, why

is it philosophy which makes “ecological” issue so topical, this very ecological issue which is apparently inherent in ordinary research field?

To start with, the term “ecology” dates back about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But only at the end of this century, the term came to science through the agency of the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, who in 1886 published his work “General Morphology of Organisms”. Etymological analysis of the concept of “ecology” tells us that “ecology” is a “science of home and house” and in a broader sense – a “science of the world surrounding human – environment”. Therefore upon any alarm (sometimes irrational!) and translation of a problem into the humanitarian sphere of knowledge is more than justified, when we have to face a lexical item of “environmental problem”, as in the language of the material objects the “environmental problem” is perceived as a rebellion against our own house and our own intrinsic habitat, which is a way of aggressive acculturation, the “winning” result of the latter would be found in ruining the human natural home. Therefore, economic and environmental activities of mankind are experience they acquired in relationships with nature. Such experience is primarily required to identify possible answers to the questions corresponding to the ability to achieve human own homeostasis in nature’s lap with the obligatory self-restraint of human influence on natural ecosystems. And the purpose of a human in these economic and socio-cultural activities is to take reasonable decisions in terms of awareness of the arisen management problems of human activities.

Environmental problem as a problem of interaction between man and nature inevitably leads us to the broader issue – the question of the correlation of culture and nature. In the philosophical tradition the original statement of this problem might have been found in the ancient cosmological worldview without which

the environmental setting of the problem can not be possible in principle, since the ancient Greeks did not think of themselves as contrasted to external nature (the macrocosm) and put out of it. According to Aleksei Losev, “Antiquity is built on *animated, reasonable* (and not just on objective, not just objectively material and sensual) sense of cosmology (Losev, 1988: 154-155). In this context, we have the Socratic motto-creed “Know thyself” as an illustration of that a human is not just an organic substance of the macrocosm, but a cosmic and harmonious potency, self-creating itself in the mode of a macrocosmic habitat. In other words, culture can not be reduced to values as the finished results, instead it incorporates the degree of development of the human himself, for neither a human, nor a culture can exist in a static state.

In connection with the aforesaid it is appropriate to recall the concept of the noosphere, which is based on an understanding of a human habitat as a media of active influence on human mind. Accordingly, the biosphere as a sphere of wildlife, including the human culture, under this influence is transformed into the noosphere, the limits of which are expanded repeatedly and determined each time by the limits of penetration into the nature of human mind. One of the brightest representatives of the noosphere theory – T. de Chardin in his famous work “The Phenomenon of Man” wrote: “Men can fully see neither themselves outside of humanity, nor humanity – outside of life, nor life – outside of the universum” (Teyar de Chardin, 2002: 140). But even in an attempt to unite into a single ontological plane men and their cultural way of being, the highest form of which is human spiritual activities, and also the world around, one can not distinguish between these two natures.

Art as the apotheosis of human cultural activity turns out to be woven into the process and range of problems of interaction between nature

and society. Therefore, the main environmental problem processes are considered not just in the context of the global crisis state, but also as a reflection of the dramatic and, in general, inevitable consequence of (a product of) culture. And in this sense the artist's work can be thought as a secondary reflection, as a repetition and fixation of the act in the "failed" culture, as an attempt to change the extemporaneous result of an activity with a scheme "nature – culture – death of nature" for a meaningful cultural outcome "nature – culture – death of nature – restored culture as art". In other words, the aesthetic result of an *art*-istic activity of an artist turns to be functional (according to Aristotle): on the one hand, the artist's work is informative, as it gives "knowledge", on the other hand, this activity is aesthetic and hedonistic as acquaintance with this work gives a pleasure to the viewer (Aristotle, 1957: 48-49).

Here we should note one important peculiarity, which determines correct entering the problem: the aesthetic phenomenon goes beyond the limits of art itself, and culture in general. To put it otherwise, in the context of humanitarian understanding of environmental issues, we can speak about the aesthetics of nature (in this case, about the destruction of the natural aesthetics). The rationale for this position can be found in the work "Aesthetics of Nature" by A.F. Losev and M.A. Takho-Godi: "Everyone understands nature primarily as a kind of a natural attribute that does not require for itself any artificial properties and any aesthetics. On the other hand, however, all the arts, without exception, not to mention the ordinary human consciousness, persistently point out the beauty of nature, its existing harmony, rhythm, and talk about the lyrical or ominous moments, which are characteristic of certain paintings of nature. Such phenomena suggest that the aesthetics of nature does certainly exist and that it is infinitely varied, capable of causing

in the human psyche both calm and excitement, senses of grandeur and immensity, feelings of peace and tranquility. Aesthetic impact of nature on man arises no doubt. But the aesthetics of nature can not be based on random impressions, personal tastes and like any science it needs logical definitions, categories and principles" (Losev et al., 2006: 5).

As we can see, the aesthetic model of nature has remained throughout human history such a visible image that surrounds and permeates human existence, provoking a man as an artist to answer through the mimetic act of creation. Strictly speaking, imitation as a key principle of creative thought is a constituent in the whole Western European aesthetics: from an ancient mythologema of *organic arrange*-ment of the world to Christian revelation about *con*-gruity and *con*-forming of man into God in freedom of creative will and expression. "God became man so that man might become God" – this famous formula expressed by the Reverend John Chrysostom bears to the greatest extent certificate of mimetic (but in this case now – ontological!) principle of human life creation. Consequently it is not surprising when an artist seems to have overcome the syndrome of postmodern paradigm by reversing (return) to nature through the understanding of the environmental problem. In a sense, it is the process of dialectical logical completing the circle of the whole period of artistic creation history: from mimesis to speculation and back. And all creative searches of modernists, which had their incarnations in various forms of art, were themselves artistic acts, a social game and escape from nature.

Aesthetic (emotional and sensual) human intentions even in the "failed", peripheral culture, i.e. in trash, waste, debris, enable one to see (and imitate, copy) the supreme example of an artist, which is nature. As one of those cultural phenomena of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is appropriate to

recall environmental art (in other cases, the term “eco-art” is used). “The term “environment” (derived from the English language) is polysemous. From the point of etymological studying it means the area surrounding something. When used in a broader sense, this term is often confused with “ecology”, the complex of relationships between any object and its environment. Most of the meanings of the term “environment” are within these limits” (Bychkov, 2003: 606).

Representatives of environmentalism (mainly plastic one) in different countries of the world do not just create works from recycled materials, but with their help attract public’s attention to ecological problems. Consonance of discordant sounds is informatively effectively: a viewer, while immersing into the experience of aesthetic, is involved in the interpretation of the presence of a very important, but diffused, and therefore invisible background of their own life, which has the negative consequences of human acculturation.

However, the representatives of environmentalism themselves are not excited about this definition. For most of them, it is not an art in the strict sense of the word, but a kind of a loudspeaker, allowing “crying out” to reach society and draw attention to environmental issues. Same professional artists using techniques and materials borrowed from environmentalism call it modern art, without any additional definitions and clarifications.

Eco-artists call to draw attention to the problem of the spread of household waste, including electronic one. They create

extraordinary paintings, sculptures, decorative objects, items of clothing, upon looking at it is not immediately clear what material has been used for their creation. Examples of environmentalism artworks include the following curiosities: “House of Glass Beer Bottles”, created by Tito Ingeneri (Argentina); “The CD Chair” from Belen Hermosa (Spain); “Sneakers of Electronic Parts” from Gabriel Disho (USA); “Advertising Banner of Obsolete Computer Displays” ( USA); “Plastic Bottle Chandelier”(Canada), “Picture- Installation of Discarded Phones”, created by Nigel Sielegar; a sculpture of a huge mobile phone from a large number of discarded mobile phones (Romania); a house of plastic bags filled with Styrofoam packing peanuts from Max Wallach; A couch constructed from 20 Macintosh II computers (USA) and many other objects.

In summary, we note the question whether environmentalism belongs to one of the trends in contemporary art remains unsolved. Probably, the formulation of such a problem itself can be removed in the result, for instance, of development and dissemination of environmentalism as, for example, a social movement. But no doubt that the phenomenon of environmentalism itself (or eco – art) is worth studying: the visual (artistic) image implies the substantial messages about a real universal threat – global ecological catastrophe, and it should become a clear reminder to the person of the existence of “first nature” and its tragic status today, when nature is dissolved in an alien state of concrete walls in metropolitan cities.

### References

1. Aristotle. On the art of poetry (Moscow, Fiction edition, 1957), in Russia.
2. Bychkov V.V. Lexicon nonclassica. Art and esthetic culture of the XX century (Moscow, «ROSSPEN», 2003), in Russia.
3. Eko art and design (<http://www.zelife.ru/ecophoto/87-ecodesigngoods.html>) [Accessed 07 December 2012], in Russia.

4. Losev A.F., Taho-Godi M.A. Aesthetics of nature (Moscow, «Science», 2006), in Russia.
5. Losev A.F. Spirit aspiration (Moscow, «Politizdat», 1988), in Russia.
6. Teyar de Chardin P. The Phenomenon of Man (Moscow, «ACT edition», 2002), in Russia.
7. Vernadsky V.I. Some Words About The Noösphere (Moscow, «Science», 1991), in Russia.

## **Эстетические аспекты энвайроментализма: экология и современное искусство**

**Ю.В. Соболев**

*Сибирский государственный  
технологический университет  
Россия 660049, Красноярск, пр. Мира, 82*

---

*В настоящей статье автором рассматриваются проблемы экологии и современного искусства в контексте эстетики энвайроментализма. Путем формально-логического анализа исторического и семиотического методов внутри проблемного поля исследования выявляются ключевые эстетико-философские аспекты взаимосвязи современного статуса экологии и художественного творчества. В ходе достижения главной цели – определения места «эстетического узла» в рамках эколого-художественного дискурса – решаются следующие задачи: определяется место экологической проблематики в историко-философском контексте; освещаются основные подходы к данной проблеме в зарубежной и отечественной традиции; намечаются возможные пути для корректного вхождения в современную энвайроментальную эстетику. Теоретический материал статьи может быть использован в курсах по эстетике, культурологии, искусствоведению.*

*Ключевые слова: эстетика, энвайроментализм, экология, современное искусство, культура.*

---