

ART FOR EVERYONE: EDUCATION TO PROMOTE BEAUTY IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Today's universities have become commercialised. Programmes that cannot make a profit or have low career earning potential are shut down or not started. In this paper, I will argue that this is extremely damaging to societies because "Beauty" is demeaned and not considered important. Consequently, societies create human-made environments that are ugly, e.g., the concrete jungles of some cities. More importantly though, I will argue that the lack of beauty in our human-made environments de-sensitises everyone exposed to them, reducing their ability to appreciate beauty. This negative feedback loop is dehumanising humanity. Universities have a role to play to reverse this trend. The paper will present an approach "Art for Everyone" the author developed and promoted as President of a private university to overcome this problem. The underlying philosophy of my approach will be discussed, it is based on American pragmatism and environmental aesthetics. The approach was implemented in the Faculty of Arts and Design. Examples of student artworks will be presented to show what can be achieved.

Keywords: *Everyday art, art for everyone, environmental aesthetics, interactive art, art education.*

1. Introduction

Universities are "intellectual hubs" for their communities. They create and disseminate scientific knowledge and have a major influence on cultural development. Unfortunately, they have become more commercialised. Many face lower Government funding, with resultant pressure to reduce costs. This often leads to humanity and art-based programmes being dropped or not started, as happened in America after the Obama administration changed student funding regulations. I believe this, coupled with market economics, leads to a low public perception of the value and benefit of artworks (aesthetic objects created by humans) in our societies. This should be a major concern for all societies given that art and the pursuit of "beauty" are what makes us human.

In this paper I will explain my approach for promoting beauty through universities called "Art for Everyone". The approach is a philosophic worldview describing how to progress towards an Ideal of Beauty. It is a synthesis of American pragmatism and environmental aesthetics. Like religions it cannot be imposed by fiat and therefore can only be implemented through leadership and culture management. I will describe my experience in implementing the approach in a private university I started up in Malaysia and led from 2013-2021.

2. Experimentalism and the ideal of beauty

Charles Sanders Peirce is acknowledged as the founder of pragmatism and considered by many to be America's greatest philosopher. He deeply influenced the pragmatists William James and John Dewey whose works are more widely known internationally (Apel, 1970).

Edgar Singer, Jr. was a student of James. A major turning point in his thinking occurred after James presented his essay "The Will to Believe" (James, 1896) to a small number of his graduate students, including Singer: "...I do recall we were very much bewildered and not a little shocked at the reading." (Singer, 1925, p. 170). The reason for Singer's concern was James alleged that any philosophy of science is based on desire, the will to believe is a desire. The idea of the disinterested scientist was destroyed forever. James also stated that religious beliefs as a means for seeking the truth must be accepted as well as agnostic beliefs (philosophies), a viewpoint the experimentalists rejected (Singer, 1925). Although in 1979, Churchman (1979) discusses the limitations of the systems approach and argues for other ways of knowing he refers to as the enemies, two of which are religion and aesthetics. He says you must be the enemy, undergo the experience without thinking.

Singer (1959) derived his experimentalist philosophy through a logico-historical analysis of past philosophies of reason. Logic to ensure rigor through exclusive and exhaustive categories. Historical to learn lessons from the past. Note the reference is a post-humous summary of his work, which was carried out mainly in the 1920's and early 1930's. It is called experimentalism because he replaced the “thought experiments” of classical pragmatism with an empirical programme based on measurement theory. Later Churchman (1948) extended Singer's work to include all logically possible methods of inquiry.

Singer used the new approach to formulate how human behaviour could be studied, arguing that mind is behaviour (Singer, 1924). Churchman and Ackoff (1947) extended Singer's work by developing an ontology for the study of mind and social systems, based on modern science (of that time). Ackoff incorporated systems thinking and developed a rigorous ontological system for the study of human behaviour as a “system of purposeful events” (Ackoff & Emery, 1972). This is an extremely short summary of experimentalism; a more detailed overview is given in Britton and McCallion (1994).

One critically important feature of their philosophy was the inclusion of ideals and how these can be pursued (Singer, 1936, 1948; Churchman & Ackoff, 1947; Ackoff & Emery, 1972). An ideal is an end that cannot be attained but can be approached endlessly. The experimentalists argue there is one ideal sought by everyone: the power to achieve one's desires. Desire is meaningless unless there is at least some chance of achieving what one wants. They call this power “omnicompetence”. They then subdivided this overriding ideal into four sub-ideals: Ideal of Truth, Ideal of Plenty, Ideal of Good and Ideal of Beauty (the focus of this paper). They rejected the religious view of an ultimate authority (God) as a source of the power and argue that the source must come from humans themselves; a viewpoint supported by the work of anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists on how our ancestor *Homo Sapiens* evolved from animals to humans (Mumford, 1967; Harari, 2011).

Singer (1936; 1948) proposes four human sources of power: ourselves, our contemporaries, future generations, and past generations, the latter being the source for pursuing the Ideal of Beauty. What we gain from past generations are emotional experiences. Through art it is possible to invoke a sequence of emotions (a rhythm) that invokes a heroic mood, a dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and a desire to make changes. This is the inspirational function of art, intensifying emotions. Art also has a cathartic function, purging emotions through recreation. The purpose of art is to create the creator (ourselves): “The artist creates no new ideals; *he creates the creator of ideals*” (Singer, 1936, p. 40). It is this innate ability to create ourselves that allowed our ancestor *Homo Sapiens* to rapidly evolve during the cognitive evolution; a human being is a “mind-making, self-mastering, and self-designing animal” (Mumford, 1967, p. 9).

The cognitive evolution occurred because *Homo Sapiens* suddenly developed large brains that allowed them to become conscious. Consciousness did not happen overnight but over a long period of time. *Homo Sapiens* had to learn how to control their bodies and minds. More importantly they created ways to communicate, both nonverbal and verbal, and by this means they invented culture (Mumford, 1967; Harari, 2011). Art, through inspiration and recreation, plays a key role in helping us maintain and develop our cultures.

When they talk about the function of art, experimentalists are referring to all artworks. They are not suggesting that each artwork on its own is capable of inspiring the heroic mood, but all artworks collectively. The implication here is that the more “good” artworks there are in our human environments the more people will be inspired and recreated. The corollary is that the more “bad” artworks there are the less people will be inspired and recreated, we will become less human.

I conclude this section with two pertinent quotations. The first is by Churchman (1979, p. 190): “...all experience, including dreams, has an aesthetic quality. In fact, my logical mind is tempted to say that aesthetics *is* that which gives the quality – rather than the content – of experience, and that experience without quality is dead – just as experience without thought is unintelligible.” The second is by Ackoff and Emery (1972, p. 245): “Art leads men [people] to find new meanings and commitments in life, and the man [person] that leads other men [people] moves them with visions of the possible and desire for the unattainable. Thus, leadership can be considered to be an art form.”

3. Environmental aesthetics

“Environmental aesthetics is a relatively new sub-field of philosophical aesthetics. It arose within analytic aesthetics in the last third of the twentieth century. Prior to its emergence, aesthetics within the analytic tradition was largely concerned with philosophy of art. Environmental aesthetics originated as a reaction to this emphasis, pursuing instead the investigation of the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments. Since its early stages, the scope of environmental aesthetics has broadened to include not simply natural environments but also human and human-influenced ones” (Carlson, 2019).

It also includes the aesthetics of everyday life such as common objects and daily activities in our everyday environments.

The inclusion of nature as a source of aesthetic experience resulted in environmental aestheticians rejecting prevailing aesthetic theories that included knowledge of the designer as being essential to an aesthetic experience. History and prior knowledge of the process that produces an aesthetic object are not necessary for an aesthetic experience (Heyd 2007). However, such knowledge may intensify the experience.

The non-cognitive viewpoint of environmental aesthetics by Berleant (1991, 1992, 1997, 2000) and Heyd (2007) has been incorporated into *Art for Everyone*. Some important properties of an aesthetic experience according to them are:

1. It involves all our senses.
2. The interested observer (person trying to have the experience) has to focus on the artwork or natural environment and immerse themselves in the experience for a sufficient period of time to induce the aesthetic response.
3. It is an act of creation (Berleant, 1997). It is not only the artist who is creative, but the interested observer as well. The interested observer re-creates the unifying perception of the artist for artworks and creates it for natural aesthetic experiences.
4. Each aesthetic experience is unique. Aesthetic objects are not interchangeable.
5. All aesthetic experiences are social. First, the society we live in influences our cultural upbringing and this affects the way we experience aesthetic objects. Second, society determines what objects are important by adding them to, removing them from, and preserving and maintaining our natural and cultural heritage. Society controls the aesthetic objects we can encounter and how we encounter them.
6. All environments have the potential to induce positive aesthetic experiences, whether they do so for human created environments depends on how they are designed.

There is considerable disagreement among aestheticians about what constitutes art. Some modern aestheticians define art as what the art world (people and institutions knowledgeable in art) says it is (Levinson 2003). A more tautological definition is difficult to imagine! Environmental aestheticians reject this notion. They believe art is for everyone, an idea propounded by Dewey in 1934 (Dewey, 2005). However, they acknowledge that experts can help us improve our ability to appreciate artworks.

According to Berleant (1997), artworks can induce positive aesthetic experiences, negative experiences or none at all. A positive aesthetic experience occurs if a creative or heroic mood or catharsis is achieved. The achievement improves the observer's ability to create further aesthetic experiences. A negative aesthetic experience occurs when no mood or catharsis is achieved and the resulting experience reduces the observer's ability to create aesthetic experiences. A neutral experience is one in which no mood or catharsis occurs and there is no impact on the observer's ability to create aesthetic experiences.

It is important to note that a positive aesthetic experience can be achieved through negative emotions. An ugly artwork may produce revulsion. A storm at sea may produce fear. But when the revulsion and fear lead to a creative or heroic mood they have generated a positive aesthetic experience.

Negative environmental experiences are of particular concern to Berleant, as they are for me. He says (Ibid, p. 63): "More striking, however, are those cases of environmental experience that have little or nothing to redeem them. These are, unfortunately, not difficult to find, from land surfaces gutted by strip mining to continuous blocks of plain, uniform high-rise apartment buildings. We make judgements of aesthetic disvalue just as we do of positive value." Some examples of negative environmental aesthetics are artworks that are offensive, trivial, deceptive, aesthetically harmful, and negative sublime (large scale systems that are degrading, such as mass culture and weapons of mass destruction). Aesthetic harm "coarsens perceptual consciousness, constricts the development of sensory awareness and the pulsating vitality of the body, and promotes sensory depravity" (Ibid, p. 75). It includes all forms of pollution.

Heyd (2007) focuses on natural environments and approaches the field from an anthropological point of view, by studying how people relate to nature. One of the most difficult aspects of any aesthetic experience is staying focused on the aesthetic object/motion; Heyd calls this aesthetic endurance. One practical way to improve endurance in natural environments is by learning stories about them. The stories guide and mediate the appreciation of nature. Stories can be verbal artistic (e.g. poetry), verbal non-artistic (e.g., Australian aboriginal dream time stories) and non-verbal (rock art, tombs, engravings, paintings, sculptures). The purpose of the stories is to help the observer view the aesthetic object in different ways.

A practical way to appreciate Nature is by wandering (Ibid). Wandering is human powered activity - walking, hiking, climbing, cycling, canoeing, snorkelling, diving, etc. – undertaken for its own sake. The aesthetic pleasure comes from the activity itself (bodily motion in space), the ordering of

objects and spaces along the journey, and the unmediated appreciation of the environment using all the senses, intensifying the aesthetic experience. Wandering is also a practical way to appreciate human created environments.

4. Art for everyone: a synthesis

Art for Everyone is a synthesis of the experimentalists' concept of the Ideal of Beauty and environmental aesthetics; the key features of which have been discussed in the preceding sections. Here I will focus on aspects that are important for taking action to promote beauty in our societies through universities.

1. Art for Everyone is philosophy of life. It cannot be implemented by fiat. People need to be encouraged to adopt the approach. This can be achieved through leadership and culture management. By culture management I mean the creation and maintenance of culture through rituals, stories, policies, and social groups (this list is not exhaustive).
2. Art should be democratic. The ultimate source of judgement for artworks in our societies is everyone, not a self-appointed group of experts. Universities can promote this viewpoint by creating societal designs that allow all members of their communities to participate in the management of their cultural heritage. Universities have an opportunity to take the lead here. If they take no action then cultural change will occur anyway as happened recently in the UK and Australia. Protesters have been successful in removing public statues of eminent people who they consider to be immoral.
3. The ability to have an aesthetic experience is an innate human trait. But like any skill it needs to be practiced and used regularly otherwise the skill level and motivation to use the skill decreases. The experience is a "whole body experience" employing all the senses. One effective way to achieve this is to build "wandering" into courses or providing "wandering" events as extra curricula activities. Universities should do all they can to improve the aesthetic skill of their stakeholders.
4. Universities should focus on experiential learning methodologies such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, service learning and situated learning. The methodologies provide "whole body" experiences within which aesthetic aspects can be included.
5. Universities are intellectual hubs for their local communities, they should embrace this notion and be open. By this I mean they should go out into their local communities and bring the communities in. They should use this openness to promote beauty in their communities. Experiential learning methodologies are practical ways to achieve this.

The Art for Everyone philosophy was implemented through my leadership skills. I actively promoted the concept of an open university and experiential learning at Raffles University, they go hand in hand. Academic staff in the Faculty of Art and Design were encouraged to look for ways to create artworks in their local communities. This is beneficial in two ways. First the communities benefit by getting beautiful artworks. Second, students benefit because they are carrying out practical projects valued by the community and learning how to manage the design/artistic process. Some examples are:

- (a) A design competition for an artwork for a business office. The owner offered prize money for the winning student.
- (b) Fashion design students designed costumes for the presenters and participants for a TV show. The wife of the owner of the show saw the costumes and was so impressed she asked a student to design one for her, which she wore to the show.
- (c) Students on an art course painted murals in a condominium and created 3D artwork in a shopping centre.
- (d) An art and design event was held in a shopping centre. It included a fashion show, drawing competition, student exhibits, and T-shirt painting for children (which they loved, it was the busiest section of the event).
- (e) Lecturers in art and design take their students on "wandering" tours to develop their aesthetic appreciation and reinforce art and design principles.
- (f) Service learning was used to develop a game for children at a daycare centre. Service learning can be used in many different ways to create positively affective artworks in the community.

Our greatest success was to be selected by Japan's Science and Technology Agency for the prestigious SAKURA Exchange program in Science. We were the first private university in Malaysia to win this award (Raffles University was only five years old at the time). Ten students and two academic staff were fully sponsored to travel to Japan on a ten day visit to conduct research. The programme was in collaboration with the Nagoya Institute of Technology, a premier engineering university in Japan.

The SAKURA programme is restricted to research in Science and Technology. Our achievement is impressive because the students were from Interior Design and Psychology. We were able to convince the SAKURA panel that designers and psychologists play a key role in translating scientific inventions into successful innovations. Staff from the Nagoya Institute of Technology were very impressed with our students' design, research and communication skills and said they gained new knowledge on how aesthetics and behavioural psychology could improve engineering design.

5. Conclusion

The paper has presented a philosophy for promoting beauty in our societies through universities. It is a synthesis of the experimentalist concept of the Ideal of Beauty and environmental aesthetics. The author implemented the approach in the Faculty of Art and Design in a private university in Malaysia. The implementation was executed through leadership and culture management. Some examples of student works were presented to show what can be achieved in practice.

Like religions, the philosophy is based on the "ought". A university "ought" to apply this philosophy because it is a good thing to do. Naturally, a university can choose to do so or not.

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