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EMBEDED THINGS; an Inquiry into Beauty

In this paper I propose that slowness and nearness[[1]](#footnote-1) should become crucial elements in developing an ethical, moral and aesthetic stance towards the environment. This kind of attitude is rooted in deep empathy rather than scientific understanding and an approach to “green building”, becomes embedded in us, ceases then to be a choice and becomes an unquestioned part of our value system.

Values, Ethics, and Beauty

***“…****the connection between an ecological perception of the world and corresponding behavior is not a logical but a psychological connection. Logic does not lead us from the fact that we are integral part of the web of life to certain norms of how we should live. However, if we have deep ecological awareness, or experience, of being a part of the web of life, then we will (as opposed to should) be inclined to care for all living nature. Indeed we can scarcely refrain from responding in this way.”*

“The Web of Life”; Frjitof Capra

In “The Web of Life” Frjitof Capra explores the ideas and beliefs brought up by the movement of Deep Ecology. He describes them as the view of the world, which puts the same value on the human and non-human life. It does not see hierarchies but networks in which all elements and phenomena of the world are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. Deep Ecology questions the very foundations of our “modern, scientific, industrial, growth oriented, materialistic worldview and way of life”.[[2]](#footnote-2) This means that our current paradigm is under question and paradigm shift is called for. The shift of the paradigm will happen when not only our opinions and perceptions change but also our values. Our value system governs our life and our every action. This change happens slowly and sometimes the process is almost imperceptible. For a paradigm shift we need a change in the value system from which a new ethics will emerge.

I believe that our ethics and our values are closely connected with what we find beautiful. We inherently want to preserve beautiful things (in museums), we want to be around them, we want interact (look at) with them. In western culture we associate beauty and beautiful things with distance. We see ourselves as spectators removed from the engaged experience with the thing in order to appreciate it in an objective and “disinterested” way.

Crispin Sartwell describes art as the experience of full absorption into the world which stands in opposition to the attitude of “disinterested pleasure”. He says “to be a spectator is to be safe”[[3]](#footnote-3) but it does not reveal the beauty of the world to us.

I explore these concepts more in depth further in this paper in the discussion of making and its embodiment.

Sartwell explores other ways of conceiving beauty. One that seems very interesting to me is his examination of Hozho - Navajo’s concept of beauty. In contrast to the western way of understanding beauty hozho is not limited to aesthetics. It means “beauty” and “health”, “balance”, “harmony”, “goodness”. It describes people, things and the universe. Hozho describes everything and the interconnectedness of all. Similarly in Chinese culture and philosophy beauty is seen as moral, aesthetic, health and cosmos related. It is in processes and relationship of all things, it requires not looking but active participating which them becomes the way of knowing. [[4]](#footnote-4)

*“A single stalk of bamboo contains within it, and displays outwardly, the li of bamboo, the principle that distinguishes bamboo from all other things. And every stalk of bamboo also contains within it the li of the cosmos, the principle by which everything is ordered.* *Bamboo grows according to the nature of bamboo and has within it the genealogical heritage that distinguishes bamboo from all other plants. But each piece of bamboo also grows according to the conditions of its environment, according to the conditions of the earth, and according to the physical laws that govern the universe. It depends on the soil and weather, and climate, but also on gravity, energy and so on. In principle, a complete understanding of a stalk of bamboo entails and understanding of everything.”*

Crispin Sartwell; “Six Names of Beauty”

Following this train of thought making is not mimicking but it is creating the world through responding to and participating in it.

I have been testing ways of instigating this change of values in both teaching my classes as well as in my own work. I believe that slow and deep engagement with the world could lead to building empathy which could then result in slow but enduring changes in value systems and in perception of beauty. I also believe that empathy cannot be taught but it has to be sensed and nurtured. The teacher can only open the space and opportunity for it to happen.

Things and Slowness

I would like to make two propositions and subsequently ask questions about them:

1. Re-presenting place as a process of making things is a way of creating a slow engagement with the place.
2. The deep, empathic relationship with the world can be built through this slow engagement with the site / place

In his essay “Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials” anthropologist Tim Ingold discusses things as they stand in opposition to objects. The inhabited world is comprised not of objects but of things. Things are not isolated and self-contained but they extend the possibilities and relationships into the world; a pen affords a possibility of writing, chair sitting, etc. Similarly there is not such concept as a tree but only “a-tree-in-the-air” with its particular location, relationship to the ground and the sky, insects and animals that live in and around it, wind, sun, and water. Ingold concludes that that “the tree is not an object at all, but a certain gathering together of the threads of life”. [[5]](#footnote-5)

If we think of things as such gatherings then making of new things is a process in which one gathers and becomes directly engaged with the threads of life. In fact in that process the maker becomes a thread herself. The thing becomes a manifestation of the process of making / gathering but once the thing is made and becomes a part of the world exposed to all the physical and cultural elements the making continues, the making or rather the process of becoming of things never ends. It requires slow and enduring engagement to be noticed and understood.

For Ingold process of form giving is life, form is death. There is no such thing as static materiality, it is rather comprised of fluxes and flows of materials which come together to create things. The world and things are in the constant state of becoming.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Slowness allows for the duration of time with the mind and the hands engaged with a particular place or aspect of the world. The mind is not charged with any specific goal or purpose, it is just there, it is lingering. It is immersed and soaked without being directed.

This is another way of describing Sartwell’s understanding of art as total absorption with the world. This is art and making as a way of knowing the world.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Through my creative work and teaching I have come to understand the process of making as an embodied and tactile way of examining the world, as a way of dwelling in the world. I realized that this understanding requires making to be slow. Slow representing and making establishes a close, intimate and engaged relationship between the one who is making and the world.

Drawing; Freshmen Design Studio[[8]](#footnote-8)

There is a series of projects conducted in the first semester of the first year architectural design studio. The objective is to develop a deep and empathic relationship between the student and the site (place / landscape) through making. In this paper I would like to focus on only one of the projects that the students embark on.

At the beginning of the semester the students draw a 1000’ line on the map delineating the system of creeks and streams in our town. That line becomes their extended site, which they explore in the course of the semester. They document their extensive “being-in-the-site” and they start to look closer and at the same time beyond their immediate proximity. They look for patterns present on the site and they consider them as consequences of interactions and relationships - they understand the site as a system of extended forces. They record these forces directly on the site through rubbing, printing, casting, etc. The students are right there, in that place, touching the ground, dirt, grass, trees, submerging in the water, taking imprints of the physical world. They are as close to being enveloped in the heart of the site as possible. This nearness in one of the goals.

The students record one pattern at least three times – from the point of view of different forces responsible for creating it. They try to isolate each force but they soon find out that this an impossible task as each force is entangled with all others and can only be revealed and described in its relationship to others. The physical and conceptual process that the students go through can be seen as stretching the place in different directions to be able to examine it from different points of view, while understanding that it can never be taken apart and reduced to individual element. The forces and patterns are always explored in their multiplicity. This is the first moment in which the smoothness of the place and its resistance to stratification reveals itself.

Fig. 01. Pattern recordings and Pattern drawing by Sydney Nelson

This duration and space of the place investigation is expanded and stretched.

“…*material things, like people, are processes, and that their real agency lies precisely in the fact that ‘they cannot always be captured and contained’ (Pollard 2004: 60). As we have found, it is in the opposite of capture and containment, namely in discharge and leakage, that we discover the life of things.”*

*Tim Ingold;* “*Bringing Things to Life”*

The recordings / drawings are **of** the site and place. They are not only the canvases for the forces and their relationships to manifest themselves. In order to “record” they have to, at least temporarily become parts of the site themselves. They become “entangled” with the site and they become things. They record (through touch, vision, sound, smell and taste) the process of becoming things.

*“The jug is not a vessel because it was made, rather, the jug had to be made because it is holding vessel ….. The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists but in the void that holds.”*

*Martin Heidegger; “The Thing”*

The thingness of the drawings is in the space between the actual artefacts and the site itself. That is the space of the process of making and revealing. That space is embedded in each student, a physical and inherent part of that process herself.

The students use the recordings to “reconstruct” the original pattern. They create large “slow” drawings that rebuild the stretched smooth and slow space of the place. Multiplicity of points of view, forces, and understandings are embedded in each drawing. The time that is taken for the drawings is the time of contemplation and reflection in which the empathy is built.

Felt

In “The Art of Living: Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Traditions” Crispin Sartwell argues that what defines art as art is the process of its production and the process of its receiving. Works of art are created for no other purpose except for their own sake and the most fundamental experience of that process is the experience of full absorption. The maker is immersed in the process of extracting the specific aspects of the world into the made or conceptualized thing and she is immersed in her relationship with the materials and stuffs of the world that she is working with - she is fully absorbed by the world itself. Conceived as full absorption, making becomes a way of not only interacting and participating in, but fully identifying with the world.

*“distinction of an organism from the environment is itself only a convenience and is, in any case, fluid. We absorb parts of the environment into ourselves and we eliminate parts of ourselves into the environment. As we move through the environment the environment quite literally moves through us.”*

Crispin Sartwell; “The Art of Living”

Fig. 02. Felted Landscape, sample

Art conceived as doing, making, and absorption is a way of knowing and being.

In my work I explore the slow medium of felt which allows me to draw from the place, examine its “placesness” and learn how to dwell in it. Using local wool and plant dyes allows for the felted pieces to be **of the landscape** rather than just its representation**.** I am identifying the inherent qualities of the place (specific textures and coloration of the wool and the hidden color of the plants that change with seasons) within the made thing. Initially using photographs and observations in the landscape I bring the distinct layers of sky, ground and depths of the Earth into the “smooth” and “entangled” relationship in each piece, they are embedded within, and through the medium and action of felting they acquire their own energy.

*“Felt, they say, is an antifabric “It implies no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an entanglement of fibers.” (Deleuze and Guattari) The ground of smooth space, likewise, is comprised of the entangled trajectories of growth and movements of people, animals and plants as they find a way through, following no predetermined direction but responding at every turn to the conditions of the moment and the possibilities they afford to carry on.”* Tim Ingold; “The Shape of the Land”

Fig. 03. Felted work, sample 02

Felt is 8,500 years old and felting is the oldest technique for producing fabric. It relies only on heat, moisture and pressure and does not require any other technology. The process itself builds on the specific characteristics of sheep’s wool - crimp, elasticity, and creep. With moisture the fibers swell and spread out their scales causing the fibers to entangle with each other. The heat, pressure and friction increase the crimp and creep causing the fibers to shrink with each other. The thickness, shape and size of felt changes in the process of making.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The process of felting is a way of creating the slow, empathic relationship with the place. In the process energy is exchanged between the felter’s body and the thing itself. It is very tactile and physically engaging and it puts one in an intimate, overwhelming physical contact with the wool – its smell, texture and taste– which is a part of the place.

Felt has its own energies and there is always an unpredictable dimension to what is made. One is not fully in control. This unpredictable dimension of felt is dependent on the qualities of the local wool, its weight, texture, ability to hold water, which come directly from the place / landscape. It is also dependent on the environment – moisture in the air, temperature, etc.

In the process of felting wool, as wool-in-the-world – material in the constant state of flux, in response to its environment, becomes my body’s extension into the world. Making, felting, dying are ways of knowing the world and place.

Conclusion

Opening up space for slowness is relatively straightforward in my own work. It is embedded in the process that I employ. There are several stages to felting each piece and each one of them is laborious and time consuming. It takes several days to complete each piece. There is a rhythm of intense physical making and reflecting – watching the wool dry. This is the rhythm of slowness and meditation. In freshmen studio, convincing students to take countless hours to complete a drawing so they can meditate on their relationship with the world is a different task all together. This kind of project is far from what they expect in their first semester of architectural education and they are often confused, frustrated and see it as a waste of time. However, in case of the students the value, in addition to slow engagement is also in tearing down their preconceived ideas on what architecture and architectural education is. Asking them to do a “slow” project at the very beginning of their studies requires them to rethink and questions values that they hold.

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1. In his essay “The Thing” Martin Heidegger explores nearness as an inherent aspect of “thinging” of things [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Capra, Fritjof, *The Web of Life* (Anchor Books, a Division of Random House, New York, 1996), 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sartwell, Crispin, *The Art of Living; Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Traditions* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1995), 126 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sartwell, Crispin, *Six Names of Beauty* (Routledge, New York and London, 2006), 133 - 152 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ingold, Tim, *Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials*, (ESRC National Center for Research Methods, July 2010), 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See: Ingold, Tim, *Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See: Sartwell, Crispin, *The Art of Living; Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Traditions* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The curriculum for this studio was a result of collaboration of four faculty members: Chere LeClair, John Brittingham, Mike Everts, and Zuzanna Karczewska [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mullins, Willow, *Felt* (Berg, New York, 2009), 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)