



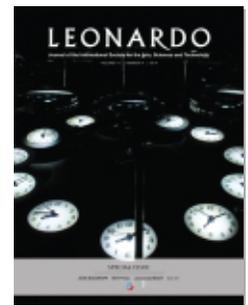
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The Functions of Environmental Art

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THE FUNCTIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ART

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Abstract

The psycho-historical theory of art posits that the functions of an artwork are effects of that artwork selected and reproduced because they fulfill humans' mental and social needs. To develop this account, I hypothesize a cluster of core functions of environmental art, which encompasses effects such as tracking, broadcasting, emotions manipulation, cooperation, and critical reflection.

What are the functions that set works of *environmental art* apart from the functions of scientific enquiry into natural phenomena and environments? Here, "environmental art" refers to all works of art that address environmental topics, regardless of the medium, style, and position advocated by the artist. To address this question, I propose to expand the psycho-historical theory of art.

Art functions theory

According to Bullot and Reber's psycho-historical theory of art [1, 2], works of art have functions because they are artifacts and all artifacts have functions [see also 3]. The *functions* – or "proper functions" – of an artifact are its effects that are reproduced throughout history because they fulfill mental and social needs in the social contexts in which the artifact is appreciated and used.

I will illustrate this concept of art functions with artworks that have documented the poisoning crisis in Minamata, Japan: Noriaki Tsuchimoto's documentary film *Minamata: The Victims and their World* (1971) (henceforth *Minamata*) [4] and Eugene Smith's series of photographs [5].

Tsuchimoto's *Minamata* focuses on residents living in Minamata and the surrounding area who suffered brain damage or gave birth to disabled children as a result of ingesting seafood poisoned by methylmercury, a chemical released by a nearby Chisso factory.

According to the psycho-historical theory, the functions of Tsuchimoto's *Minamata* are the effects of this documentary that were reproduced throughout history because *Minamata* fulfilled mental and social needs. Arguably, the reproduced effects of *Minamata* have encompassed effects such as causing the

appreciator's perception of cinematographic depictions of interviews with victims of environmental poisoning (*pictorial* and *narrative functions*) and manipulating the appreciator's emotions and feelings (*emotions-manipulation function*).

The psycho-historical theory of art appreciation

The psycho-historical theory [1] combines this historical account of art functions with a psychological model that distinguishes three modes of artistic appreciation. The first mode, termed *basic exposure*, occurs when the appreciator is exposed to effects of the work in the course of its perception but does not have or seek knowledge about the work's causal history and context.

In the second mode, appreciators adopt an attitude of inquiry into the causal history of the work termed the *design stance*. Appreciators adopt explanatory stances like the design stance to infer unobservable historical information relevant to its appreciation from observable information carried by the work. For example, the design stance occurs when an appreciator of *Minamata* opts to search for information about the historical context, seeking an understanding of the relationships between key agents in the relevant art-historical context (victims, artists, perpetrators, bystanders, etc.).

The third mode, referred to as *artistic understanding*, is an act of comprehending the context-dependent status and historical functions of the work for the purpose of either appraisal or explanation. This understanding results from the appreciator's ability to become sensitive to key aspects of relevant art-historical contexts as a consequence of using the design stance.

The three modes of appreciation correspond to three distinct forms of sensitivity to an artwork's effects and functions. An appreciator's *basic exposure* to a work might provide this appreciator with *sensitivity to basic art functions*, such as the pictorial and narrative functions of a work. However, basic exposure cannot provide the appreciator with the causal and contextual understanding necessary for the ability to identify the genealogy of context-specific functions. Understanding *context-specific art functions*, such as norm-dependent functions, demands that the appreciator engages in an explanatory stance like the design stance and develop a form of artistic comprehension of the

relationship of the work with its historical context of creation and transmission.

Because environmental artworks present a wide range of genres, styles, and media, we should acknowledge the plurality of effects that they have on their makers, commissioners, audiences and ecological contexts. Nevertheless, I argue that one can identify a cluster of effects that are core functions of works of environmental art.

Tracking and broadcasting

Two intertwined functions of environmental artworks consist in *tracking* (e.g., monitoring and recording over time) information related to particular environmental facts and *broadcasting* (publicizing) this information. These are *epistemic* functions in the sense that they aim at contributing to the public's knowledge of data acquired by such means as environmental tracking and surveillance.

Environmental artworks that use techniques that record data (e.g., acoustic, light-distribution, movement data) often provide their audience with means to track and publicize indicators of environmental facts and crises that would otherwise remain unperceivable or inconceivable. For example, in providing a record of testimonies and disabilities, Tsuchimoto's documentary *Minamata* provides audiences with the means for breaking social silence and keeping track of human agents affected by or implicated in the environmental crisis.

Monitoring and broadcasting functions are at the core of environmental art because the causal processes that environmental artworks depict are often unobserved or unobservable, such as side-effects and downstream causal ramifications only detectable long after their chief cause had been generated – e.g., effects of hazardous chemicals [6].

Admittedly, monitoring and broadcasting effects are found in practices other than artistic activities, such as scientific and educational communication. However, makers of environmental artworks have recourse to broadcasting modes that are distinctive, at least in the fact that the broadcasted material is intended to belong to styles and genres classified by means of art-historical art concepts (e.g., "documentary" or "photojournalism").

Emotions manipulation and cooperative actions

Another plausible function of environmental art is the elicitation and modifica-

tion of the appreciator's emotions and feelings, an *emotions-manipulation function*. For example, both Smith's work on the Minamata crisis [5] and Tsuchimoto's *Minamata* [4] appear to be designed to elicit empathic feelings in their audience because they repeatedly display or narrate circumstances that can be expected to elicit the appreciator's empathy (e.g., the victims' medical conditions, acts of discrimination, the insensitivity of corporate and governmental responses).

The emotions elicited by environmental artworks are likely to connect with effects that are normative in the sense that they prompt cooperative actions and "activisms" [7] guided by prescriptive principles; thus, performing *cooperation and political functions*.

In broadcasting environmental information, for example, an environmental work may induce a typical feeling (e.g., empathy) from the appreciator. Because emotions have motivational effects [e.g., 8], this elicited feeling could prompt actions such as deciding to abide by deontological norms or to contribute to cooperative political actions guided by deontological norms. Numerous environmental artworks often broadcast indicators of an environmental crisis – e.g., poisoning in *Minamata* – that elicit emotions such as fear or empathy and motivate the audience to support environmental legislation and regulation.

An important hypothesis of the psycho-historical theory is that emotions elicited in basic exposure to a work differ from emotions elicited in the mode of artistic understanding [1: pp. 131-132]. In contrast to aesthetic appreciators, who are limited to basic exposure, appreciators who develop artistic understanding on the basis of the design stance [1] can derive emotions and feelings from enquiries into context-specific functions. For instance, in the case of *Minamata*, they may articulate explanations of the work based on the premise that Tsuchimoto's intention was to elicit empathic understanding of the victims' world and of the silencing of their narratives [9]. In doing so, appreciators can deploy a refined sensitivity to the norms indirectly upheld or critiqued by Tsuchimoto's work (e.g., moral norms versus norms dictated by the greed of the perpetrators). On the basis of this contextual sensitivity, they can develop a range of emotions and practical responses that are responsive to history and societal mechanisms examined by Tsuchimoto.

On the psycho-historical account, works of environmental art are vehicles for communicative acts that intertwine knowledge-eliciting (e.g., monitoring and broadcasting functions) and cooperative action-eliciting functions (e.g., emotions-manipulation function). Their societal and political roles stem from the fact that they contribute to raising awareness of environmental issues in the public debate.

The art of environmental reflections

The reader might be concerned that, on the psycho-historical account, no clear boundaries separate environmental art and propaganda. For example, environmental artists might often be faced with the difficult task of having to address an environmental crisis without having adequate knowledge to adjudicate the complex scientific and social conflicts this crisis generates. In such a situation, using art to support a *partisan* view might amount to propaganda biased by simplistic *heuristics* [i.e., simple decision-making rules, see: 10].

There is, however, a way in which environmental art can avoid becoming simplistic propaganda. Environmental art may focus on eliciting the appreciator's reflective thinking. For example, because it is based on interviews that contrast different perspectives on the events in Minamata city, the functions of Tsuchimoto's *Minamata* [4] might encompass reflection-eliciting functions rather than simplistic propaganda functions aimed at biasing the appreciator's judgment. Thus, environmental artworks may aim at eliciting the appreciator's ability to question environmental issues and assess competing practices that engage with such issues. This *reflection-eliciting function* is another essential epistemic function, which might derive from the appreciator's adoption of explanatory stances akin to the design stance [1].

Because reflective thinking can guide audiences into artistic learning and scientific understanding, eliciting of the appreciator's critical and reflective thinking is preferable to indoctrinating the appreciator with biased interpretations of environmental issues.

Art-science collaboration

A related issue is the topic of the collaboration between art and science. An appreciator's (art-elicited) reflections about environmental issues would lack relevance if the appreciator completely mis-

understands the mechanisms that determine the environmental issues under examination – e.g., if the appreciator thinks that the poisoning in Minamata was caused by evil ghosts rather than by methylmercury produced by a factory. To prevent such misunderstandings, the appreciator's environmental reflections should benefit from insights provided by the natural and social sciences that study environmental issues. Environmental artworks, I contend, are unlikely to succeed in their moral and political functions if they dramatically lack reliability in the performance of their basic epistemic functions (e.g., providing the appreciator with environmental knowledge by means of tracking and broadcasting).

In sum, to act as artistic and political catalysts of environmental change, artists can contribute to (i) the public's epistemic and emotional sensitivity to environmental issues and (ii) the public's cooperative action on and reflective thinking about the environment.

References and Notes

* This article is based on a paper presented at the 3rd Balance-Unbalance International Conference, 31 May-2 June 2013, Noosa, Queensland, Australia.

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