

WE DO EVERYTHING AS WELL AS WE CAN
Script for a multi-media presentation on
Art and the Futures Studies

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If all goes well today, I would like to help some of you heighten your ability to look at the present and future environment through more open eyes of love.

Esthetic preferences, or what I'm going to call simply "art" for the rest of this talk, has many functions. Artistic expression means many things for the artist. Of this, I care nothing today. I am interested in making some observations about the social functions of art--how esthetic preferences relate to the activities of societies. And out of the several identifiable social functions, I'm further going to center on only one--art helps man relate to his environment and to other men--it interprets for man certain socially-relevant aspects of his environment. It helps order the chaos of objective reality by simplifying and evaluating the world our senses perceive. This is my first point, which I mention not in order to develop a complete esthetic theory for you, but rather to help orient you to the arguments that follow. For if art has as one of its functions that of relating man to his environment, I will be inquiring whether our current strongly anti-technological and backwardly pastoral esthetic preferences which underlie the substance of so much of our formal and informal art education are not actually performing a profound disservice for us. Instead of helping us to see what is indeed the characteristic beauty of our society, it may be that we are being encouraged to yearn for an environment that can never be again--and that, in fact, perhaps never was.

Art, in this sense then, should illuminate man's present environment, and help prepare him for his future. In a metabolically stable society, in societies which characterized the world until about three hundred years ago, the present was like the past, and the future was like the present. Thus, until fairly recently in man's history, an esthetic preference which was functional for the present was certainly functional for the future, and it made "good sense" to socialize members of the tribe into these traditional (i.e. balanced/oriented) esthetic preferences. (I should point out that there probably is no such thing as "art" or an "artist" in a metabolically stable and hence role-undifferentiated tribal society. As Alan Watts stated: "What our museums now exhibit as the 'art of other cultures and ancient times' are religious, magical and household utensils exquisitely and lovingly made," (in Jack Burnham, "Real Time Systems," p. 50).

But we no longer live in a stable society--we live in a society characterized by absolutely unprecedentedly rapid change--technology-induced change, in fact. And as a cushion for our future shock, we have increasingly looked to our most recently-remembered past for comfort and security, and

I fear we are now in serious danger of elevating this understandable yearning for the past into a major political program which we call “the ecology movement.”

My second point is that the mode of art--art as medium and art as subject--is always related to the level of technology of the surrounding society. Here, too, in a stable society, what is considered to be the subject--and object--of art, and what are considered to be appropriate media for artistic expression, do not change. In our accelerating society, they do--or they should--change, but they do not for we suffer the same lag and nostalgia in this respect as I noted above. In Marshall McLuhan's terms, “When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.”

In a society of scarcity, as all societies were until recently, art was valuable because it was scarce. “It's an original!” “It's a work of art!”

And, in a society of scarcity, art is an object among objects. “It's a work of art.” “It's an art-object.” A thing, separable, to hang on the wall and look at. You go out for art. But as the Balinese say, according to McLuhan, “We have no art. We do everything as well as we can.”

Men are men--in contrast to being animals--in part as a consequence of their interaction with their technologies. Men without tools are animals. We may feel that this should not be--that man's greatest mistake was conscious thought. But men do think, and they do become toolmakers.

We know about some of those technologies--fire, the wheel, stone tools, boats. But man's most revolutionary early technology was agriculture--an invention which occurred about 10,000 to 20,000 years ago. Before that time, man lived, like other animals, by hunting for food all the time. He ate what he could find whenever he found it. But then he did an amazing thing. He decided to tame nature--to grow food man's way, not nature's. To put crops in rows, to remove the weeds, to irrigate, to separate out the best grain, to put fertilizer in the soil. At the same time, he began messing around with animals too: he developed horses, he bred man's weirdest monument to genetic engineering--the cow. Chickens, geese, goats, turkeys--in short, man modified his environment to suit his purposes.

Now that was roughly only 15,000 years ago. But by now, we have glorified the farm, the pasture, the country road as though this manipulation of the environment was somehow natural and right and in accord with God's will. “The man with the hoe” is romantic and heroic. “The man with the tractor” is on the borderline. But “The man with the synthetic food-processing plant”--a horror, a threat, a plague, an ecodisaster. But the sudden introduction of a hoe into a society which roots around the land with its hands revolutionizes that society as profoundly as the computer revolutionizes ours. And man has done more damage to his environment through agricultural practices than by any other technological activity.

Many of the common man's notions of art derive from the early industrial period. We became aware of nature when industrialism was beginning radically to modify it; we became conscious of "culture"--in the sense of high art to be purchased and displayed and admired in cultured homes and by cultured people in museums or concert halls--with the greater wealth and mobility brought by incipient industrialism. Because our transition from a pre-industrial to a post-industrial society has been so rapid, many of us still have pre--industrial notions of art--especially as to what is an appropriate subject for art, or medium for art. Cory Gallery--that used-car lot for objects of art in Ala Moana is a stunning testimony to our belief that we should, as cultured beings, purchase for exorbitant prices and display for the amazement and edification of our friends, paint spread on canvas by famous men who wield brushes. Or, we are quite willing to accept along with our Green Stamps, copies of the Mona Lisa, "indistinguishable from the original!" But therein lies another problem for us.

Industrial technology emerged as a dominant force in our lives about 100-150 years ago. The prevailing characteristics of industrial technology, characteristics that came to permeate all of industrial society's institutions, are linearity, reproducibility, similarity, mass producibility, conformity, and anonymity. As industrial technology improved in efficiency--another prevailing characteristic--scarcity eventually gave way to plenty, and plenty to over-abundance. And as the techniques of industrial technology improved, the increasing ease of abundant reproducibility eventually removed the limitations of similarity and conformity. Feats that were extremely difficult became easy, and if easy once, then easy twice, and a hundred, and a thousand times. And if once expensive, then a thousand times more cheaply; and if once unique for a solitary reaper, then a thousand times abundant for his burgeoning progeny. One book, laboriously hand copied, reverently created, gives way to a printing of 10,000 copies at a quarter each. One suit of clothing, tailored for you, or made by yourself for yourself, gives way to size averaging--small, medium and large, in the face of the all too obvious fact that you are not one of three average sizes, but your own unique, and hence ill-clothed, self.

One hut, one manor, one home give way to Levittown, or Hawaii Kai, or Ala Wai townhouse condominiums.

And one Parthenon--Several years ago, I saw an ad for an art school. There were two pictures in the ad. On the left was a picture of the Parthenon in Greece.

A thing of beauty, so rare, so magnificent. But in the picture on the right was a Parthenon on every hill. As far as you could see, a Parthenon. But that's not Greece, that's Waikiki!! One Royal Hawaiian, OK (now). One Contessa, OK maybe, a thing of beauty. An erection to our founding fathers.

But a forest of high rises is just urban blight.

But how can that be? If one Parthenon is a wonder, why not a thousand? This is the dilemma which mass production brought to art as scarce, preservable object. And as techniques of reproducibility improved, so that the one thousand Parthenons looked "just like the real one," or as the three-for-\$1.00 Rembrandt facsimiles looked even better than a \$100,000 original, the pretensions of art as rare object came to an end.

But we are no longer in the age of industrial technology. We are in a post-industrial age of cybernetic technology. And cybernetic technology--the computer, for instance--is personalizing, individualizing, patient, non-linear.

(Recent discussions on time have contrasted dream time with cyclical time with linear time. These perceptions of time have nothing to do with differences between East and West, or underlying philosophies, in my opinion. Rather, they are related to modes of dominant technology. Agrarian societies tend to be cyclical, and industrial societies are linear. Such is the 'logic' of their underlying technologies. But the cybernetic society is not based on a linear technology. "Time's arrow" describes the recent past. With the computer we move into n-directional time through n-dimensional space. And that is no metaphor.

Real time, machine time, computing time, print-out time. The point as no dimensional; the line as one-dimensional; the crossed lines as two, the line through the axis and perpendicular to the other two lines as three-dimensional; the lines through the axis and perpendicular to the three as four-dimensional; and so forth. These progressions *are* part of a mathematical technique called Factor Analysis, which places items in as many dimensions of space as are "really there," regardless of whether our limited senses perceive them or not. And so also is time n-directional. Not dream, not cyclical, not linear.)

But a second characteristic of cybernetic technology is seen in the emergence of new materials. Just as new capabilities of fuel and resources promise hope for our economic and material survival while fossil fuels and extracted resources are on the point of exhaustion, so also are we utilizing new materials to guide our esthetic orientations.

Now, let me turn for a moment to our environment. I said that one social function of art is to help man relate to his environment and to anticipate the environments of his futures.

Many of us, especially in Honolulu, yearn for the sylvan beauty of an earlier day. We see our environment as deteriorated, polluted. It was so much more beautiful and natural before. But was it really? I have already warned that it would be an error indeed to consider an agrarian landscape to be "natural." We may prefer such a scene, but we should understand that

it is strictly man-made. But how about Honolulu? Here is the way we see Honolulu now. But how was it yesterday?

“Honolulu was not an attractive place (writes Gavan Daws in the *Shoal of Time*, p. 37). Down by the sea, the weather was hot, humid, and unpleasant, and the sparsely covered hinterland of the district stretched back an uncomfortable distance to cooler valleys. The beaches were indifferent, mostly mud flats and raised coral reefs.” (This was a description of Honolulu in about 1793)

As we move around Honolulu today, we might reflect on the fact that almost every green growing thing we see--not only Kapiolani Park, and the fabled shimmering palm trees of our beaches, but much of the greenery on our mountains were planted there, and maintained by man--or at least brought to the islands by man. Before man arrived, these were barren rocks indeed.

So change is the lesson of our environment, and as the population of Honolulu, and Hawaii, and the world grows--as it certainly will--in the next 50 years, and as we continue to live in a world where nature and man are increasingly under the responsible control of man, then I believe that to continue to encourage the nostalgic yearning for a neglected past is to encourage the proliferation of very unhappy and frustrated people.

And it need not be. If garbage is going to dominate our future, then we need to learn to groove on garbage. Find the beauty in the world around us. It is there if we want it to be there. The Japanese have an esthetic called *shibui* which finds the beauty in ugliness. Here, as in so many other ways, we might learn to live in a crowded, man-made, man-serviced, “deteriorated” environment with happiness and optimism, as the Japanese do.

As you leave this room today, take a good look at the *shibui*--not *shibai*--around you--not at the green mountains beyond, but the highways, the buildings, the filling stations, the construction equipment, the power lines, the automobiles, and contemplate the following words which describe Las Vegas, but have considerable meaning for us in Honolulu: “Here we can reconsider chaos with a fresh cold eye, more precisely to examine without prejudice an environment which, by the canons of orthodox modern taste, is regarded as the archetype of architectural ugliness and unregenerate urban banality. But it has a unity--a subtle, complex unity. “It is in fact very clearly and obediently oriented to the kind of human activity that goes on there. It is first of all an autoscape--an environment through and across which man moves by car. Space thus is a fluid, shifting thing, perforated by light and dissolved in movement rather than articulated by form.

“In short, this architecture, in an environmental sense, is based on communication rather than form. It is symbolic rather than spatial, and it is informal, anti-heroic, non-monumental. It is an architecture that frankly and candidly includes functions and accomodates itself to immediate needs

without an inhibiting theology of *a priori* theory, good taste, and purism. Chaos is not so chaotic, thus seen. It is something that abounds in life and energy from which we learn and fashion a conscious architecture that will make sense in our shifting, fluid, mutable world.”

Shifting, fluid, mutable. These are the presumptions for the future of the British Archigram group as well. A frankly, brashly pro-technology group of architects--pro-Rococo technology--”Barbarella,” not “2001”. A technology loved by man, and loving man, not the sterile glitter of IBM and Pan-Am in the 1960’s, but an exuberant technological sense. And an architecture based on the transitory nature of life, not on false notions of permanence, like so much of our architecture now. Archigram wants to put up buildings that will automatically collapse at the end of ten years. Who knows how we will want to use space ten years from now? Why should we any longer build to last forever? That makes sense only in a stable society.

Finally, as we move into a society of abundance, into a computer-serviced society as almost all of the mental as well as manual duties of man are taken over by artificially-intelligent creations, then man can turn to the world of play that God intended him to live in before the apple and the snake. And instead of art being object or product, it can be process. Art will be life--unseparated from life, undifferently whole. In a cybernetic society, in a society of leisure, we can say again with the Balinese: “We have no art. We do everything as well as we can.”