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Thomas Leddy

San Jose State University, tle403@aol.com

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The Aesthetics of Junkyards and Roadside Clutter

Thomas Leddy

Abstract

A little more than thirty years ago, Allen Carlson argued that although the concept of "Camp" would seem to allow for the aesthetic redemption of roadside clutter and junkyards, it does not.^[1] He opposes those who claim that if one takes the right attitude to roadside clutter it can be seen as aesthetic. In this essay I argue that there is nothing wrong with this, although I will not base my argument on the idea of Camp sensibility.

Key Words

aesthetics, Allen Carlson, junk, junkyards, Camp, clutter, environmentalism, Susan Sontag, thick appreciation, thin appreciation

1. The Aesthetics of Waste

Several years ago my sister, a painter, took me to a junkyard she was quite excited about. "Bring your camera," she said. She had been purchasing items there to add to her paintings as assemblage elements. We went and had a great time. When I first started writing this paper it struck me that I would be sad to hear that the junkyard was gone. Recently my sister informed me that is in fact gone, and I actually was saddened. Carlson argues that my aesthetically positive response to this junkyard would be inappropriate, and that it is almost inconceivable that I would be saddened by its disappearance. He thinks that I could appreciate the junkyard in what he calls a "thin" formalist sense, but not in a "thick" knowledge-based sense, and that my advocating the aesthetic value of junkyards is unethical since I am thereby indirectly advocating many negative values, especially anti-environmentalist ones. Yet I am quite sympathetic to environmentalism and, although I am sad to see the junkyard gone, I would probably be happy enough if, in the unlikely event, I found later that it was replaced by a lovely meadow. But one person's roadside trash is another's treasure, and I wouldn't be surprised if Carlson would insist that my junkyard must go. Thus, I must deny his premise that junkyards and roadside clutter generally are not aesthetically pleasing, *if* by that he means (and I think he does) that they are *never* appropriately aesthetically pleasing."

Denying this premise is tricky since the word 'clutter' has a negative connotation. People who, like myself, sometimes favor clutter might be better described as favoring what *others* consider clutter. Still, part of the aesthetic fascination with clutter, for those who like it, is that it is not neat. As I have argued elsewhere, messiness can sometimes be a positive aesthetic quality.^[2] In short, I think that we should allow for the possibility of aesthetically appreciating roadside clutter and junkyards, and even for the possibility of being saddened if a favorite junkyard were to be removed.

It is not that I favor preserving of eyesores. But I do favor appreciating and even sometimes preserving some things that *others* consider eyesores. This parallels the fact that I find my own working-class neighborhood endlessly fascinating visually, although much of what I appreciate and photograph there would be considered clutter by others. The middle-class neighborhood next

door is delightful to walk in; all of the front yards are very tasteful. But they are, photographically, pretty uninteresting by comparison. That is, there are many photography buffs like myself who take more pleasure in cluttered or visually unusual front yards than in the "tasteful" ones found in more middleclass environments.

How is it possible that clutter and junkyards can be legitimately appreciated? Modern artist made it possible: the works of Pablo Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg, Edward Kienholtz, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Alberto Burri, John Chamberlain, the Arte Povera artists, and many others. A recent example would be Richard Misrach, who takes gorgeous photos of waste sites in natural settings, for example, "Bomb, Destroyed Vehicles and Lone Rock, Bravo 20 Bombing Range, Nevada," 1987. In another recent example, contemporary painter Altoon Sultan takes roadside objects in rural environments that might often be seen as unsightly and transforms them into things of beauty.

The aesthetics of junk has not been lost those who are in the business of waste management and recycling. Norcal Waste System, for example, has an artist-in-residence program in which artists are encouraged to incorporate junk and waste into their creative process.^[3] Seventy-eight artists have participated since 1990. It is doubtful that Camp sensibility played much of a role in this. Most of this work, rather, is an extension of the concepts of collage and assemblage developed in the early part of the 20th century. There have been other motives as well for artistic interest in garbage. Rauschenberg, for example, was interested in a critique of the merely pretty and the decorative.^[4] And some of the artists at the Norcal site are interested in issues of recycling and environmentalism.

Carlson is very aware of the influence of contemporary art on our appreciation of junkyards, although he puts his point in terms of the concept of Camp. As he says, "Camp has developed hand in hand with certain *avant garde* art movements, some of which often imitate such things as billboards and tin cans, and others of which occasionally utilize junk and trash as a medium."^[5] He thinks that these art objects can sometimes escape his condemnation of junk without in any way legitimating aesthetic appreciation of the junkyard. But is this really possible?

In the article which originally inspired Carlson's theory, Monroe Beardsley refers to a cartoon in which a junkman proclaims that his pile is not an eyesore because of its similarities to some works by Picasso. Beardsley argues that this gives rise to what he calls "the dilemma of aesthetic education."^[6] The dilemma is between two ways of directing taste: one that is reformist towards an ideal of beauty, while the other aestheticizes everything, taking the aesthetic point of view whenever possible. The first is more traditional. It is associated with programs of beautification in which highways are shielded from junkyards and billboards. But he observes that the second might sometimes be appropriate when the intensity of the regional qualities of the object "partly depends on its symbolic import." In such circumstances an ordinary object can be expressive. As he puts it "Suddenly, a whole new field of aesthetic gratification opens up. Trivial objects, the accidental, the neglected, the meretricious and vulgar, all take on new excitement. The automobile graveyard and the weed-filled garden are seen to have their own wild and grotesque expressiveness as well as symbolic

import." [7] He thinks that although at first we find litter, junkyards, and so forth unsightly, but they may be perceptually transformed. However, he sees the second way as "defeatist" as it does not aim to eliminate the junkyard. Moreover, he observes, a "weighty tradition" argues that sometimes there are moral objections to taking an aesthetic point of view, as in aestheticization of Auschwitz. Nonetheless, he thinks that "there is nothing...that is per se wrong to consider from the aesthetic point of view." [8]

Just before bringing up the case of the junkyard owner, Beardsley mentions the concept of Camp that was developed in the late 1960s by Susan Sontag. [9] Sontag argued that Camp, a certain way of seeing, can transform our experience of things we generally do not find aesthetically pleasing, for example kitsch. [10]

This attitude, however, is hardly limited to Camp. It is equally true for Dadaist, Surrealist, and Postmodern sensibilities. Moreover, Camp is a specialized sensibility that is only indirectly related to aesthetic appreciation of junkyards. (Beardsley seems to realize this, but Carlson does not.) Sontag associates Camp with "artifice and exaggeration." It is a sensibility that "converts the serious into the frivolous." Basically it is an urban and gay thing. (Sontag calls it "androgynous," and although she does not *identify* it with gay culture, she observes an affinity. Also, when she refers to junk she seems mainly to be thinking of things to be found in junk stores rather than to junkyards or roadside clutter.) Camp is associated with the glitzy and the glamorous. In the last line of her essay Sontag that the ultimate Camp statement: "it's good *because* it's awful." Yet this does not seem to apply to appreciation of junkyards and roadside clutter. Rauschenberg's work, for example, seems unrelated to Camp. [11] Nothing he says, for example, implies that he thought garbage was good because it was awful!

2. Sensibility and Aesthetic Appreciation

The interest in junk as a medium for art was widespread in early 1960s. Arman (Armand Pierre Fernandez) a French artist, produced a show in 1960 called "*Plein*" ("The Filled") in which he completely filled a gallery with garbage. Even before that, in 1959, he produced found-object sculptures called "Poubelles" ("Garbage Cans") which were glass cases filled with cast-offs of friends. [12] Relocating to New York City in 1961, he continued his interest in garbage, making realistic bronzes of it in the 1970s. He saw himself as attacking the culture of consumption and waste. [13]

Although Sontag is right that having a certain sensibility is important, something more traditional and broader than Camp, like disinterested perception, the aesthetic attitude, or Beardsley's own "aesthetic point of view" would probably be sufficient for appreciating junk. Carlson recognizes this, but avoids discussing the point as he thinks that the concept of the aesthetic attitude, and presumably the "aesthetic point of view," are questionable. [14] However, even if the aesthetic attitude idea has been expressed awkwardly in the past, there is surely nothing wrong with the notion that someone who appreciates junkyards aesthetically looks at them in a different way or attends to different features than someone who's interest is, for example, purely financial. When a junkyard owner appreciates his property for the money it brings in, this is not aesthetic appreciation. Country Vermonters often appreciate their junk piles as collections of possibly useful materials: junk cars, for example, as sources of spare parts. This too would not be *aesthetic* appreciation.

Part of Carlson's argument against roadside clutter is that it is not natural, that roadsides that appear in "nature" (i.e. the relatively pristine nature that conservationists, environmentalists, and many poets love) should not have such unnatural things as junk and clutter alongside. Yet, if his argument is that the non-natural in natural environments should be excluded from appreciation, then it should be extended to Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater*. Perhaps Carlson does not so extend it because he finds Wright's work attractive. If so, then the issue really has nothing to do with what is natural: it is entirely a matter of taste. Carlson is aware that the argument based on what is natural is weak. As he observes, "artists and craftsmen make objects more aesthetically pleasing simply by making them less natural," for example, when a cabinet maker polishes his or her wood. Also, defining "natural" in such a way as to exclude what humans do is problematic given that humans are products of nature.

Carlson therefore turns to a stronger argument based on the distinction between thin and thick senses of "aesthetically pleasing." The thin sense refers to physical appearance, whereas the thick sense goes beyond the physical to refer to "qualities and values which the object expresses and conveys to the viewer."^[15] To illustrate the distinction, he quotes John Hospers: "When we contemplate a starry night or a mountain lake we see it not merely as an arrangement of pleasing colors, shapes, and volumes, but as expressive of many things in life, drenched with the fused association of many scenes and emotions from memory and experience." Yet exactly the same thing can be said about a junkyard, i.e. that it is expressive of many things in life, has many associations, etc. Indeed, when Beardsley introduced the second horn of the dilemma he did so by describing the aesthetic experience of an automobile graveyard as one in which the objects are taken as symbolic and expressive.

At first it seems that Carlson simply assumes that appreciation of a junkyard must be thin rather than thick, that it must be somehow purely a matter of attending to physical qualities, which Hospers, at least, seems to understand in terms of the qualities that formalists like in art. Yet, it is not clear that we ever see things aesthetically purely as physical and without other cultural associations. If so, the very distinction between thick and thin is problematic. At best one could speak of appreciation being *relatively* thin or thick.

Carlson thinks that a junkyard could not be perceived aesthetically thickly for then it would have to be perceived as expressive in a special and unacceptable way: "[T]he quality must be associated with the object in such a way that it is felt or perceived to be a quality of the object itself." I take this to mean that there cannot be any consciously imaginative seeing involved in this perception. Just as earlier I argued that there are no examples of pure thin appreciation, I argue here that there are no examples of purely unimaginative perception. Humans are naturally imaginative: they not only see, but "see as," and they often do so at the same time. It is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between what is seen in the object perceived because it is felt actually to be there, and what is imaginatively projected onto the object. The distinction only works at the extreme, as in imaginatively projecting a camel shape onto a cloud, where the expressive quality of the cloud in this case has nothing to do with the cloud's actual nature. The word for imaginative projection in science is "hypothesis" which, as we know, is necessary for scientific knowledge. Seeing something as or under

a scientific concept can involve an imaginative projection that goes contrary to conventional ways of seeing or understanding. Similarly, seeing expressive qualities in an object may well go contrary to what one feels is clearly a quality within the object itself. Imaginatively seeing something is seeing it in terms of its potentiality or in terms of its possibility, and these are the features of a thing that give it, phenomenologically speaking, life.

Carlson asks what life values are expressed through aesthetic appreciation of clutter and junk. I have no problem with this My problem arises when he argues that the values expressed by a junkyard must be "waste, disregard, carelessness, and exploitation." I suggest, rather, that the values affirmed in aesthetic appreciation of a junkyard are, or at least could be, those of non-conformity; recognition that messiness can sometimes be valuable; a belief that the margins of our world have their own unique interest; and perhaps nostalgia for things of another era that have achieved a certain patina through rust and decay. An important value affirmed is that old discarded things can come alive again visually if looked at or treated in the right way. In this way, the aesthetics of junk may be closely related to the aesthetics of antiques. In short, Carlson's thick perception of junkyards is just one of many.

3. Do Life-Values Affect Aesthetic Appreciation?

The negative values Carlson mentions may *seem* to be the values expressed in junkyards to someone who does not appreciate junkyards aesthetically, or to someone who appreciates junkyards for formalist reasons but who feels bad about it ethically. The problem, perhaps, goes back to Sontag, who saw Camp as emphasizing texture and style as opposed to content. Sontag seems to have taken an overly formalist approach to appreciation of junk. Her neglect of content left a vacuum, and Carlson rushed in with his idea that the content is waste and disregard. Carlson admits that a junkyard could also express the value of hard work, but insists that this would not erase the other values expressed. Note that junkyard owners themselves would hardly see themselves as expressing the values Carlson attributes to them.

Still, even if the life-values of some of the people who produce roadside clutter are waste and disregard, these are not necessarily the life-values of those who appreciate it aesthetically. Moreover, the life-values of some who produce what others consider roadside clutter are not at all of this sort: I am thinking of people who live in the desert and who prefer to surround themselves with worn-out cars, appliances, and other junk, but arranged in an interesting way. Further, what something is expressive of, when that thing is not consciously produced as an expression (and a junkyard is seldom consciously produced as an expression of anything), is hardly a matter of fact. Carlson, himself, admits at the end of his essay that he cannot be certain what life values these objects express, [16] which seems inconsistent with his earlier claim that they must express values of waste, etc..

Another way to approach junk that is both thick and positive can be found in a blog by Andy Green: "A real study and use of Junk will recognize that bottles and burnt cars are testimonies to anonymous men; that rusted washing machines are monuments to domestic and economic struggles; that all derelict objects are imbued with particular resonance in particular locations that can bring new (sometimes troubled) meanings to life." [17] Green goes on: "These Junk-sites mark the intersections of our personal histories,

underlying interests, conscious and unconscious desires. They may look dirty or offensive to some, but junk is really a slide show of our deep humanity, as well as our flaws." Green further writes: "It is possible that junk can allow us to confront the more dangerous 'wild' aspects of our social environments, as well [as] offering a more constructive way of approaching our connection to each other across a divided social landscape."

Green's approach to junk is socially engaged. Although aesthetic, it is not aestheticist or Camp. Perhaps moving beyond Rauschenberg, Green denies interest in "dumping a rusty washing machine on the floor of the Tate and calling it a clever critique of consumer based societies." As he puts it, " Those kinds of statements soon become far too general, lose their force of argument, their specific context, and lapse into aesthetic cliché all too easily: an 'aesthetics' of junk that has lost a meaningful relationship to a living landscape."

Carlson thinks it is empirically uncontroversial that we cannot appreciate a junkyard in the thick sense. But the claim would only be uncontroversial if the expressed qualities *must* be the ones that Carlson describes. We could appreciate junk in a thick sense if we took it to have the expressive properties I or Green have mentioned.

Carlson further believes that appreciation of the effect means condoning the cause. Thus, on his view, if I appreciate a junkyard I must be condoning values of waste and exploitation. And yet this is not the case in our appreciation of Versailles. As Kant once observed, in appreciating Versailles we are not condoning all the values that went into its making, for example absolute monarchism.^[18] One could say that from a moral perspective the palace of Versailles is expressive of waste and exploitation. (Rousseau certainly thought so.) But I think we can still experience it as beautiful. Moreover, even if we do not accept Kant's notion of disinterested perception we can see that a thick appreciation does not require taking on all of the moral baggage of origins.

It has been suggested by an anonymous reader of an earlier version of this paper that our ability to appreciate Versailles is a function of historical distance and that we could not as easily appreciate a more recent palace built on a foundation of injustice. This may be true to some extent, but note that Kant himself was not significantly temporally distant from the creation of whatever palaces or representations of palaces he may have seen. There is nothing to keep us from aesthetically appreciating recent products with questionable ethical histories, nor is it clear that forbidding appreciation of morally questionable buildings produces any ethical good that can counterbalance the aesthetic loss.

At the end of his essay Carlson turns to the issue of artist appropriation of junkyard materials. He first makes the dubious suggestion that Duchamp was expressing the negative values of waste, etc., when he displayed *Fountain*. He then suggests, more plausibly, that when an artist is successful in using junk in his or her art, as Picasso was in his *Bull's Head*, the result is only made possible when the junk is recycled in such a way that the expressive properties of the junkyard are erased. This may work for some uses of junk in art. But consider Robert Venturi, Steve Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown's influential idea that we can learn from Las Vegas. In 1964 Peter Blake wrote a book called *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape*, in which he spoke of neon signs as roadside clutter.^[19] In 1977

Venturi, Izenour, and Brown transformed our understanding of neon signs and "the strip" through their postmodernist redefinition of architecture inspired by the time they spent in Las Vegas.

4. The Ethics of Aesthetic Appreciation

In response to Carlson, Yuriko Saito takes a somewhat different approach to roadside litter, junkyards and clutter.^[20] She holds that Carlson's argument against roadside clutter is not aesthetic but ethical. She writes that "As an *aesthetic* argument, the reference to the ethically undesirable expressive qualities of littering, power lines, and strip-mining does not make a good justification against them."^[21] For example, the aesthetic qualities of the natural environment and the expressive qualities of the strip mine might both be reinforced by their mutual contrast.

At this point in her article Saito takes a different tack, arguing that although contrast is important in a painting or a play, with respect to *environments*, we normally appreciate unity and consider contrast to be a demerit. We appreciate both natural and man-made environments in terms of their overall ambience or character, which can be spoiled if mixed. She admits that this argument would fail to show that a unified environment such as a Las Vegas-like city would aesthetically fail as a replacement of natural scenery, but suggests that the ambience of Las Vegas is one of vulgar, loud commercialism that is not really enjoyable. This seems the wrong approach as, although it is not enjoyable to her and to me, it is clearly enjoyable to the thousands who choose to visit. Her solution is to affirm Carlson's argument against roadside clutter not as aesthetic but as ethical, but with aesthetic implications. Abusive treatment of the natural environment would always, on this view, destroy its aesthetic value.

However, Saito's argument could be equally directed against Las Vegas itself and towards my favorite junkyard simply because she does not find them enjoyable or thinks they are examples of abusive treatment. And this same argument could equally be directed against *Fallingwater* or any humanly constructed environment since they all involved replacing natural scenes with human ones, and there is always someone who doesn't enjoy them.

In contrast to Carlson and Saito, and in line with the position I have presented here, Paul Ziff argues that "anything that can be viewed is a fit object of aesthetic attention."^[22] The only limits are one's power to create the appropriate frame or context for what one sees. Ziff describes what he oddly calls an antiaesthetic approach to litter. As he puts it, "The antiaesthetic approach is to alter one's view to see the original litter not as litter but as an object for aesthetic attention...One can look upon the disorder of litter as a form of order a beautiful randomness a precise display of imprecision."^[23] By 'antiaesthetic' he seems to mean not non-aesthetic but "contrary to traditional aesthetics." He then suggests that looking at the work of abstract expressionist painters Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey might help one to appreciate litter. Perhaps Monet and Braque would be helpful too, as he says: "Garbage strewn about is apt to be as delicately variegated in hue and value as the subtlest Monet. Discarded beer cans create striking cubist patterns."^[24]

There are, of course, distinctions between junkyards, roadside clutter, garbage dumps, and oil spills.^[25] Junkyards, for example, are often intended to contain items for re-use. It might be argued that, because of this, Carlson was wrong in his thick description of

junkyards. It might further be argued that he would have been right if he had given a similar thick description of roadside litter, garbage dumps, or oil spills. I admit that some things are more difficult to appreciate aesthetically than junkyards; a major oil spill would be an excellent example. Nor should we be in any way required to try to appreciate such things. At the same time, nothing says that they cannot be appreciated. There have been artworks that have focused on the aesthetic properties of similar phenomena: Robert Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) would be one example. My main point is that there is no one right thick description of a junkyard, roadside clutter, a garbage dump, or even an oil spill.

5. Conclusion

It might be argued that my approach relies on artworks and not on immediate experience of the environments described. My view of this is that artists are particularly sensitive observers of our world and that they capture aesthetic features in their works that we might not normally notice. For example, a photographer may typically think, "wow, that looks interesting" before photographing a junkyard. (I take "interesting" here to be an aesthetic property.) Photographer Robert Adams, recently featured in the television series, *Art 21*, photographs clear-cut forests. Although he disapproves of the aesthetic devastation caused by clear-cutting, he still finds beauty in certain aspects of what he photographs.

Some would argue that aesthetic appreciation of junkyards or any other sites that would entail harming the environment would be no different from aesthetically appreciating representations of the horrors of Auschwitz, and that both are blameworthy. But as Ziff helpfully observes, there are some things that disgust us so much that we cannot aesthetically appreciate them, although it may be that others can. I do not deny that there could be a case for moral censure for aesthetic appreciation of representations of the horrors of the holocaust that focused on qualities of, for example, grace and charm. Still, there is no problem with aesthetically appreciating something that one also considers to be horrifying or inhuman. If there were, then the Greek tragedies would have been impossible. Finding something tragic *is* a kind of aesthetic appreciation. Consider also that we can appreciate a forest that has been devastated by fire or mud-slide. There is something sublime in such instances of natural destruction. Appreciation of the results of human devastation, for example an oil spill, may not be so different.

Nor do I think that it is required that we be aesthetically disgusted by whatever disgusts us ethically.^[26] I suspect that those who would require this believe, like Plato, that aesthetic appreciation of representations of evil will lead to carrying out acts of evil, but it has never been clear that this is the case. I have heard that sunsets are more beautiful in smoggy conditions. However, we should not be required to stop appreciating their beauty because of that. After all, aesthetic appreciation of something does not require a commitment to its continued existence. I would be willing to sacrifice some measure of beauty in sunsets so that fewer people would suffer from debilitating lung disease. I would not be willing to sacrifice my appreciation of the beauty of current smog-related sunsets simply because someone thinks it immoral for me to do so, as my appreciation is not hurting anyone. Of course, once I learn that the sunset has been enhanced by smog conditions, my appreciation of it might change...I might see it as a sad beauty, and so too with my junkyard if I found it was a major source of pollution. What may be

taken as a sign of uncaring on the part of the person who created the pollution or the roadside trash is not thereby required to be seen, in a thick way, as an expression of uncaringness.

It might finally be argued that the roadside is a commons and that different aesthetic standards are applicable to a commons than to private home or public art gallery. The average citizen, so the argument goes, should not have to put up with whatever the avant-garde aesthete might happen to appreciate. For example, people have been known to discard plastic bottles filled with urine onto the roadside in Oregon.^[27] Most people find this disgusting, and although a photograph of such a thing may be pleasing to a contemporary art-lover, depending on how the photograph is taken, this would be no reason to condone the continued presence of such bottles. The idea of different aesthetic standards for the commons harkens back to the debate over Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, in which it was sometimes argued that the public should not be made the victim of avant-garde aesthetic standards that they do not share. The argument had some merit, and in the end it did not seem unreasonable that the work was removed because it was displeasing for many who lived and worked in the area. Of course the plastic bottle of urine that I have seen in a photograph was presumably not placed on the roadside as an aesthetic statement, avant-garde or otherwise, and no artist claims responsibility for it. So the case may seem more open and shut than the Richard Serra case.

I will concede that different aesthetic standards might be appropriate for the commons; something like "majority rules" may be more appropriate than the rule of the Humean good judge in the commons, at least some of the time. This is tricky since we do not want to say that the public can never be educated. The majority opposed Maya Lin's *Vietnam War Memorial* at first but eventually came to embrace it. On the other hand, it doesn't make much sense to talk of educating people into appreciating plastic bottles filled with urine. Rules like "no trash on the roadside, especially no plastic bottles filled with urine" are perfectly acceptable, even to those who might find such things sometimes aesthetically interesting. Nor is it unreasonable for people to find these objects displeasing. After all, we have deeply ingrained attitudes against aesthetic display of human waste, attitudes that although they might be challenged in an art gallery, probably should not be challenged publicly. On that other hand, I do not think anyone is morally required to find a photograph of a plastic bottle of urine disgusting, or required not to find it aesthetically pleasing. This is true *even though* most of us would find it disgusting that someone should impose their urine on us in this way. It is also true that even though a photograph might evoke that disgust, it is still possible for such a photograph to be good and even beautiful. The same goes for the actual scene photographed, i.e. that it makes a photographically interesting scene. In fact, I think the photograph I have seen is in fact a good and interesting photograph largely because of its expressive as well as its formal properties. It might then be asked what does it mean for me to say the photograph is good. Unlike Kant, I do not demand or even expect that everyone find it good. What the phrase means is simply that I would be surprised if people with similar training in the contemporary visual arts would *not* be able to see the photograph, or the scene photographed, as I do.

Where the commons end and the private realm begins is another matter, and it is often hotly contested. City ordinances often make

demands about how one ought to decorate one's front yard. For instance, there is a rule in my city against parking a car on the lawn. On the other hand, some people in my neighborhood value the aesthetic appearance of their cars and would prefer to display them in this half private/half public place. I tend to support more freedom for self-expression in such cases. I also tend to value graffiti art (but not mere graffiti tagging) over many manifestations of conventional but boring "good taste" that dominate our urban and suburban landscapes.

In conclusion, Carlson's distinction between thick and thin concepts fails to resolve Beardsley's dilemma of aesthetic education. It would only do so if there was only one possible, quite negative, thick description of aesthetic experience of junkyards, and I have shown this to be implausible. Beardsley himself believes the dilemma is irresolvable, and I basically agree. The best we can do is attempt to balance the competing interests of those who wish to beautify road scenes through eliminating what they consider to be unsightly, and those who value quite different aesthetic effects. The debate, in the end, is really quite similar to that between architectural conservatives in San Francisco who wish to limit building design to pre-modernist styles and those who believe the city can find a place for modernist architecture. I have not sought to defend all junkyards and roadside clutter, but simply to clear a space for a form of aesthetic appreciation that is freer, more imaginative, and more in tune with important discoveries of modernist art than is allowed by current morality-centered views in aesthetics.

Endnotes

[1] Carlson, Allen, "Environmental Aesthetics and the Dilemma of Aesthetic Education," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 10 (1976): 69-82. Carlson speaks here of the movement to clean up the environment, eliminating clutter because it is an eyesore. Carlson continues to use the distinction between thin and thick concepts central to this paper in his more recent "On Aesthetically Appreciating Human Environments," *Philosophy and Geography* 4:1 (2001) 9-24.

[2] "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: 'Neat,' 'Messy,' 'Clean,' 'Dirty,'" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53:3 (1995) 259-268. Reprinted in *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, eds. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2007).

[3] www.sunsetscavenger.com/AIR/artists.htm, accessed Aug. 15, 2007. On this site Sudhu Tewari says that all of his artworks and musical instruments are made from recycled garbage.

[4] See John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005.) especially his Chapter 3, "Garbage Aesthetics."

[5] Carlson, Allen, "Environmental Aesthetics and the Dilemma of Aesthetic Education," 72.

[6] Beardsley, Monroe, "The Aesthetic Point of View," (1970) in his *The Aesthetic Point of View* (Cornell University Press, 1982).

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[9] Sontag, Susan, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publications, 1969).

[10] Perhaps he associates Camp with the extremes of aestheticization because Sontag spoke of incarnating "aesthetics over morality," *Against Interpretation*, p. 32.

[11] In the 1950s he would collect discarded commonplace objects on his street in New York City and attach them to his works, calling the results "combines."

[12]

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_11_93/ai_n15950859 accessed Aug. 23, 2007.

[13] www.artnetgallery.com/Arman.htm accessed Aug. 23, 2007. When he arrived in New York City, he met Marcel Duchamp with whom he played chess. *The Villager*, 75:23, Oct. 26 - Nov. 01, 2005, Obituary, "Arman, 76, Tribeca artist whose medium was garbage."

[14] Jerome Stolnitz defended the aesthetic attitude in his *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), pp. 40-42.

[15] Carlson, Allen, "Environmental Aesthetics and the Dilemma of Aesthetic Education," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 10 (1976): 75.

[16] Carlson, Allen, "Environmental Aesthetics and the Dilemma of Aesthetic Education," 81.

[17] Taken from *Pete Ashton's Blog* at <http://peteashton.com/2005/08/wasteland/> written Aug. 24, 2005, accessed Aug. 15, 2007. By writing Pete Ashton I have since discovered that Andy Zoop is a pseudonym for a friend of Ashton's named Andy Green.

[18] Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement* tr. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952). Kant does not mention Versailles directly, but he mentions a palace and in the same paragraph he also mentions Rousseau's criticism of "the vanity of the great who spend the sweat of the people on such superfluous things." P. 43.

[19] Venturi, Robert, Steven Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, rev. ed., 1977; originally published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

[20] Yuriko Saito, "Is There a Correct Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 18, No. 4. (Winter, 1984), pp. 35-46.

[21] *Ibid.*, p 42.

[22] Ziff, Paul, "Anything Viewed," in *Aesthetics*, eds. Susan L. Feagin and Patrick Maynard (Oxford University Press, 1997) orig. 1984.

[23] The grammatical oddness of Ziff's sentence is intentional on his part.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[25] It might be interesting to develop a general theory about such aesthetic phenomena, although I am suspicious of any theory that

would posit some sort of continuum in which the various items have a fixed place, e.g. junkyards on one side because they contain useful items, and Auschwitz on the extreme other side because images of it could never be aesthetically appreciated without moral harm. Such a view would seem simplistic and would be contrary to the case-by-case approach recommended by Beardsley and myself.

[26] In a very interesting article Marcia Muelder Eaton argues otherwise. "Kantian and Contextual Beauty," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 57, No. 1. (Winter, 1999), pp. 11-15. Eaton's line is like that of Carlson, her take on Kant being similar to Carlson's "thin" concept: it is just a matter of pleasure in surface qualities vs. ethical evaluation of something in terms of its deep ecological meaning. My argument has been that this is a false dichotomy and that there are other thick concepts under which such things as purple loose strife (the invasive plant species Eaton's friend forbids her and us to appreciate) can be appreciated aesthetically. She does think the purple loose strife could be called "beautiful" but only in a special "Kantian" formalist sense of the term, one that is rarely used and that ultimately does not matter. One advantage that much-maligned formalism has is that it is not committed to the idea of "one true contextualist story" but allows for seeing things in different ways, for re-contextualization. I agree with Eaton that beliefs and moral values do make a difference in aesthetic perception sometimes to some people, but I do not think this supports the idea that we ought not to appreciate purple loose strife.

[27] I owe this example as well as the connection to *Tilted Arc* to Flo Liebowitz, who commented on an earlier version of this paper at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics. Flo's husband took the photograph of the bottle with urine which she showed during the session.

Thomas Leddy

San Jose State University

Tle403@aol.com

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