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## Aesthetization, Artification, and Aquariums

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## Asthetization, Artification, and Aquariums

Thomas Leddy

### Abstract

'Artification' is a term recently coined and developed in Finnish aesthetic theory and proposed by Ossi Naukkarinen in this volume as the process of treating non-art objects as art. In this paper, I distinguish between a superficial sort of artification and a deep sort. The superficial sort is the one we need to worry about. In Part I, I consider various issues surrounding the definition of artification. In the process, I situate artification within the larger question of aestheticization. I understand aestheticization in terms of recent psychological work on supernormal stimuli and Virginia Postrel's defense of style and surface in the commercial world. I conclude the first part with remarks on how the debate goes back to Plato's rejection of arts in the *Republic*. Part II addresses the issues of artification and aestheticization within aquariums. I argue against scientific cognitivism and in favor of aesthetic pluralism in relation to appreciating natural environments. This pluralism allows for valuing artification and aestheticization, and hence for aquarium displays that show marine animals alongside works of art. However, I reject the shallow form of artification that can be found in the kitsch products sold in aquarium museum stores. I conclude with a reflection on ideals of artification and the role of the professional philosopher of art and aesthetics in contemporary life.

### Key Words

aesthetic pluralism, aestheticization, aquariums, artification, everyday aesthetics, natural environmental model, scientific cognitivism, superstimuli

## Part I. Aestheticization and artification

### 1. Artification

Two phenomena have been of much interest to aestheticians and philosophers of art in recent times. They have been called aestheticization and artification. Aestheticization is commonly understood as simply "to make aesthetic" but can also mean treating something as aesthetic that really ought not to be, perhaps for moral or practical reasons, as in the aestheticization of war. Actually there is nothing wrong with applying aesthetic properties to war, for example saying that this battle was "ugly" or this stratagem was "beautiful." The problem appears when some, like the Italian Futurists in the early twentieth century or some contemporary computer gamers today, treat even the most horrifying elements of war as beautiful, for example the way metal rips into flesh. Sometimes the charge of aestheticization implies a broad critique of culture. Ossi Naukkarinen, for example, defines aestheticization as "the notion that more and more things get absorbed into the aesthetic sphere, and that aesthetic matters are becoming increasingly important in our daily li[ves]."<sup>[1]</sup> The question of whether the aesthetic realm is becoming wider and more important is sociological, but behind it is a worry that this may not be a good thing, somewhat like the worry about the aestheticization of war.

As we shall see, there is considerable overlap between issues of aestheticization and of artification. Artification is defined, also by Naukkarinen, as “using art-based ways of thinking and acting outside the traditional, institutional boundaries of art and making non-art things into something art-like or art-affected, even if not necessarily turning them into art proper in the institutional sense of the word.”<sup>[2]</sup> For the purpose of this paper I will assume this definition. I will be discussing artification mainly, but aestheticization will also be relevant. I should note that, although aesthetic values and properties are immensely important to the various arts, many other values and properties are important as well. Therefore, treating something as art-like is not the same as looking at it from an aesthetic perspective.

Naukkarinen’s definition of artification seems at first to include all processes involved in making works of art, for whenever one makes a work of art one is taking things that are not art and turning them into art. One automatically thinks of such works as Duchamp’s *Fountain*, in which a non-art object, a urinal, was transformed into a work of art by placing it on a pedestal in an art show. However, the same could be said for collages or even for painting in general, since paint in the tube is a non-art substance that is then made into something art-like—actually, into art—by the painter. Still, Naukkarinen’s reference to “even if not necessarily turning them into art proper” shows that he is really concerned with objects that are *not* turned into art proper. So I think we can safely assume that the term ‘artification’ is not intended to refer to the process of making a work of art. Where, then, does artification happen, and how important is it?

Before we go on, it is worthwhile to observe that, although ‘artify’ and ‘artification’ appear in no standard dictionary, a non-standard dictionary available online (UrbanDictionary.com) has defined these terms.<sup>[3]</sup> It states that to artify is to apply artistic techniques to something. The first example given is, “The wall was artified with graffiti.” It further says that ‘artify’ can mean “improve the environment and life with and through art” and “expand experience and enrich the world through artistic actions.” It speaks of parents planning to “artify their home by placing a local artist’s work in their garden” and a company deciding to “to artify corporate gifts through more creative ways of making donations, like giving away family passes to museums and concerts.” The garden example lies somewhat outside Naukkarinen’s definition. He did not explicitly include adding art to a place as a method of making art-like. However, the graffiti case is artification in his sense. The graffiti was art-like and made the wall more art-like. On the other hand, the corporate gifts example seems to confuse an act that promotes access to the arts with acts that make something art-like. Nothing is made more art-like here.

The meaning of ‘artify’ given in this dictionary makes it similar to ‘beautify.’ *Webster’s* defines ‘beautify’ as “to make beautiful or add beauty to” as in “We beautified the room by adding fresh flowers.” The parallel is not exact, however. We might say “He artified the garden by adding art,” but not “He beautified the garden by adding beauty.” Rather, we say that he beautified it by adding beautiful flowers, beautiful decorations, or beautiful works of art.

*Webster’s* also gives a definition for ‘prettify’ which means “to make pretty.” Examples of usage include “The city is trying to *prettify* its downtown.” and “The movie *prettified* what was in reality a very bloody battle.” The O.E.D. adds “spec. make pretty in an affected or superficial way.” If ‘artify’ is derived from, or closely related to, ‘prettify,’ then it will imply superficiality and will mean “to make art-like in a superficial way.” One can stipulate that it not have this negative connotation but I suspect that it will lurk in the background anyway. I prefer distinguishing between deeper and shallower forms of artification, the deeper drawing from the most culturally and humanly meaningful aspects of the arts and the shallower drawing from the more superficial or at least more surface-oriented aspects of the arts. In this paper, I suggest that the deep artification is probably a good thing, whereas the second is more problematic, although not always bad.

So where does artification happen and what is its significance? One area would be when a form of popular entertainment outside the traditional institutional boundaries

of art is increasingly treated as art-like, or even as a new art form itself. Graffiti started off as a popular non-art activity but could be said to have become more art-like over the years and, in fact, has become an art form of its own. This use of 'artify' should be distinguished from one graffiti practitioner complaining that another was trying to artify graffiti in the sense of superficially making it seem more art-like, perhaps even violating its authentic nature. This would be another sense of 'artify.'

However, although we can understand graffiti (or a type of graffiti) as literally becoming an art form, it is another thing to treat something as art-like without its actually becoming an art. One could say that sports is artified when it is treated more and more like an art form, perhaps by emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of the sports experience or by seeing practitioners as primarily expressing their own emotions. This could be true even though we still do not see it as an art form. Whether or not this is actually happening, and whether it is good for sports, can be left to sports theorists.

I mentioned earlier the worry of the graffiti practitioner that artification could erase authenticity. One could also speak of religion as suffering from artification when it loses its authentic nature and is seen as just aesthetically interesting. This might happen when the individual rituals of the church are treated as if they were works of performance art. Other uses of the term 'artification' include treating festive decorations as a way to make an event more art-like and treating certain business or scientific practices as art-like, perhaps as a way of increasing creativity. In short, 'artification' is a highly diverse concept, hard to pin down.

Still, it might be worthwhile to ask whether artification is a common thing and whether there is more of it (for example, in the major societal institutions) than previously. For example, the urban landscape is increasingly dominated by advertising (consider the recent introduction of advertisements on the floors of grocery stores), and advertising could be considered a popular art form. Perhaps this increase in advertising means an increase in artification. Alternatively, someone might see advertising as precisely *not* art or the *antithesis* of art, and so the increasing presence of advertising would not entail artification. From this perspective, adding advertising to the environment would not make it art-like. One could even go so far as to claim that taking advertising *from* a cityscape, as happened recently in São Paulo, where all billboards on walls and storefronts were eliminated, would make it *more* art-like. (Some at least found that it had new aesthetic qualities: "serene" and "clean.")<sup>[4]</sup> The best person to answer the question of whether our world is increasingly dominated by advertising would be a sociologist. However, the questions of whether this is generally a bad thing, and whether this is actually an example of artification, might be better answered by a philosopher.

Imagine that religion pulled away from its authentic object and came to be treated more and more in the ways that we treat art. Of course, this would have different meanings at different times depending on *how* we treat art. The artification of religion might be a worse thing in a period in which art itself is treated in a superficial way than in a time in which it is understood as revealing underlying metaphysical truths or as serving deep human needs. As a thought experiment, assume that art is becoming increasingly superficial in the twenty-first century. (This has been argued by some.) Assume also that our conception of art has also become increasingly superficial, so that as something becomes more art-like, it becomes more like the superficial art of the twenty-first century. Under these assumptions, the artification of religion would also be seen as taking it in the direction of superficiality. There may be people, however, who believe that religion can be improved through artification. If so, they would be appealing to another sense of art, perhaps related to how art was before the twenty-first century, or perhaps to art today that is not superficial. From this perspective and for some people, artification of religion might not be so bad. For example, what for an atheist is basically a collection of falsehoods can become fascinating and valuable if artified in this sense, that is, by treating it as literature or performance art.

Consider an area in which artification may be reasonably considered a good thing.

Fashion seems to have become increasingly art-like in recent years.<sup>[5]</sup> (It has also been argued that art has become increasingly fashion-like, a different, although not unrelated point.) It is arguable that this actually *improves* it. It is not uncommon for members of the fashion-world to associate their pieces with the history of art, treating their designers as fine artists with genius, presenting their best work in art museum shows, and so forth. All of this is a sign of artification.

Yet there remain important differences between fashion and art. For example, as Diana Crane has observed, branding may be essential to the fashion industry, whereas copyrighting is more important in the arts and, although forgery is a constant concern in the arts, especially in painting and sculpture, the existence of fakes in the fashion-world just seems part of the system.<sup>[6]</sup> Still, one could argue that there are also important differences between the various art forms, between, for example, painting and poetry, and that the differences between fashion and painting or poetry are really no greater. One could also argue that the artification of fashion is just a matter of trying to increase the prestige of fashion by associating it with something nobler. Again, one could reply that there are two forms of artification of fashion: a superficial form that simply adds to fashion the trappings of the art world, and a deeper form that incorporates some of the most important values of art.

I probably wouldn't have much more to say about artification if it was not for my interest in the parallel issue of aestheticization. This comes out of my interest in and advocacy of a new sub-discipline of philosophical aesthetics called the 'aesthetics of everyday life.' Briefly, there is a debate within this subdiscipline between those who believe that everyday aesthetic appreciation is importantly like and importantly connected to art appreciation, which is my position, and those who believe that this approach is wrong, since it ignores the everydayness of the everyday, a position held by Yuriko Saito, for example.<sup>[7]</sup> The latter might accuse the former of the artification of everyday life, here taking "artification" as being something quite negative. From this perspective, there is nothing wrong with treating the Japanese tea ceremony as art, but an everyday drinking of tea can be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities without necessarily treating it as art, and indeed treating it as art would be to lose some of its most important features, those associated with its everydayness.

## 2. Aestheticization

In addressing this issue, keep in mind that artification needs to be seen in the light of the wider, older notion of aestheticization. Aestheticization is generally considered to be something negative. I have already mentioned aestheticization of war and the worry about the increasing presence of advertising in our lives.<sup>[8]</sup> (As I write this paper on an airplane, a video screen in front of me constantly asks me to purchase a movie, and I can't turn it off!) Most critics of aestheticization, however, only focus on certain, relatively shallow aesthetic qualities, for example "cute," "attractive" or "pretty." "Tragic" is usually not mentioned as an aesthetic quality relevant to aestheticization. This is significant, since fewer thinkers would complain of the aestheticization of war if that meant the recognition of the tragic dimension of war.

For example, is Homer guilty of aestheticizing war? The answer is not obvious but it is at least worth discussing. Usually, aestheticization is associated with prettification, which is obviously shallow. And although beauty is taken more seriously than prettiness, "beautification" too can have a negative meaning and can be used with a sneer. Nonetheless, just as there can be a deeper and nobler form of artification, so too can there be for aestheticization. One positive form of aestheticization would be when we see everyday objects as taking on enhanced meaning after we have seen their representations in great works of art.

Critics of aestheticization observe that our lives are increasingly bombarded both by advertisements and by the display of the products they are selling. Both the advertisements and the products feature aesthetic qualities designed to encourage us to purchase things that are not necessarily good for us. The obesity epidemic has been attributed both to increased advertising, particularly directed to children, and increased use of fats and sugars as superstimuli that cause a kind of addiction. "Supernormal stimulus" is a term coined by Niko Tinbergen to describe what happens

when instincts are disconnected from their natural origins. For example, an exaggerated imitation of something can influence animals, including humans, more strongly than the real thing. Deirdre Barrett described how birds that lay small blue and gray-speckled eggs will prefer to sit on very large bright blue balls with black spots.<sup>[9]</sup> In her book, *Supernormal Stimuli*, Barrett applies the notion of supernormal stimuli to problems in contemporary culture. In addition to the obesity epidemic, she discussed ways in which men can become addicted to pornography at the expense of real relationships, and how television can capture us by appealing to the very instincts that helped us survive in prehistoric plains. Barrett's main point is that we should resist the power of supernormal stimuli. This could be interpreted as a very strong concern about increasing aestheticization.

Although Barrett attacks many things that are harmful to our society, she also directs her barrage against many things that are relatively harmless and some things that are quite beneficial. In a brief section of her book, she appears to attack art itself by claiming that artists generate supernormal stimuli. For example, musicians use their instruments to refine and amplify tones that signal health and friendliness, thus, on Barrett's account, distracting us from true health and friendliness.<sup>[10]</sup> Could it be that many of our finest pleasures and most valuable experiences are based on supernormal stimuli?

At first it seems that if the effect of supernormal stimuli is the paradigm of aestheticization, then it is a very bad thing for our society. Obesity is clearly something to avoid. However, gourmet cooking, which may be seen as a kind of artification of cooking, also depends on supernormal stimuli. So should we throw out the baby with the bathwater? Barrett encourages us to give up supernormal stimuli, devoting our lives to healthy practices in eating and exercise at the expense of everything else. Her approach is reminiscent of Plato's outlawing of the arts in *The Republic* and is open to many of the same objections. Indeed, the debate over aestheticization and artification is an old one. It is essentially the debate between those who favor a completely ethical/healthful approach to life and those who, while not denying the value of ethics and healthy activity, favor the aesthetic and the artistic as equally essential to the good life.

Aestheticization need not be limited to that which is harmful and superficial. In fact, aesthetics is traditionally associated with reflective and complex handling of sense pleasures, especially as found in the arts. Based on this, one could argue that the epidemic of obesity has nothing to do with aestheticization of the best sort. This relates to the issue of artification. As mentioned above, if advertising is seen as a kind of popular art form, then the increase of advertising's presence and power in our lives can be seen as an increase of artification. On the other hand, one could say that since advertising and other modes of focusing on superstimuli take us away from the values traditionally associated with paradigmatic works of art, then this trend would be more a matter of de-artification than of artification. It could be that these forms of representation are drawing on certain superficial aspects of art and are art-like only in this way. In the process, they drop the values that have been most important for art. If, for example, art is seen as being involved with the self-expression that comes from self-understanding, then this follows a very different direction from advertising. Similarly, if art is seen as disinterested or distanced, then this, too, moves in a different direction. So, is aestheticization a good thing or a bad thing? The answer is that it depends on what aesthetic qualities are attended to and how this is done.

On practically the opposite side of the fence from Barrett is Virginia Postrel. Her book, *The Substance of Style*, puts the rise of aesthetic value in our everyday lives in a much more positive light.<sup>[11]</sup> Her view is that aesthetics, by which she means the surface aesthetic qualities associated with decoration, adornment, and styling, is becoming increasingly important in our lives.<sup>[12]</sup> Artification enters in her example of the rise of expensive restaurant stoves in private homes. Contrary to other social scientists who see the purchase of these items as a search for status, Postrel argues that aesthetic reasons are primary, and that the purchaser sees this luxury object as a work of art, much like a painting. Postrel believes that the purchaser finds combined

in the stove a "vision of an ideal life of home cooking with the immediate pleasures of beauty and power."<sup>[13]</sup> Postrel's book is a good counter to the assumption that the aesthetics of everyday life has more to do with functionality than with the pleasure we take in style and surface, yet she seems too accepting of the world of commodified pleasure that has come to increasingly dominate our lives.

In short, the entire issue of aestheticization, as well as of artification, goes back to the ancient debate over how one ought to live one's life. Those who complain about aestheticization are usually committed to an ethicist or even moralist approach to life. They generally believe that focusing on aesthetic qualities keeps one from realizing other more important virtues. They wish to block the ascendancy of aesthetic over moral values characterized by such figures as Oscar Wilde and, to some extent, formalists like Clive Bell. They believe that aesthetic values need to be subordinated to moral values. Peg Brand has argued for such a position from a feminist perspective, for example.<sup>[14]</sup> On the other hand, many aestheticists would argue that moral values are just a special kind of aesthetic value, and that life, as Nietzsche suggested, is only really justified aesthetically.<sup>[15]</sup> From this viewpoint, when interpreted from the perspective of art, a person's life is a work of art, a person is an artist of his or her own life, the values that great art promotes should be primary, and the best experiences we have in life are art or art-like experiences.

## **Part II: Aesthetics of Nature: Problems with Scientific Cognitivism**

There is a parallel debate in the aesthetics of nature. The standard view today is that it is patently wrong to appreciate natural phenomena as if they were art or in an art-like way. It is thought that one should not appreciate a landscape as if it were a landscape painting, or a piece of driftwood as if it were a piece of found art. On this view, called "scientific cognitivism," and also called "the Natural Environmental Model for appreciation of nature," only appreciation of nature from a science-based perspective is acceptable.<sup>[16]</sup> Scientific cognitivism is a kind of monism. A monist holds that there is only one right way to appreciate nature. Pluralists, by contrast, hold that many ways of appreciating nature are appropriate. Pluralists believe that scientific knowledge can be of great value in nature appreciation but reject the view that it is the only appropriate method.

Aesthetic pluralists are like situation ethicists, the greatest advocate of which was pragmatist John Dewey, who wrote "reflective morality demands observation of particular situations, rather than fixed adherence to *a priori* principles."<sup>[17]</sup> Pluralists hold that whether a particular method of nature appreciation is appropriate depends on the situation. They ask, "Is it the right method for that particular time or place?" Whereas scientific cognitivists think it is never right to appreciate nature as though it were a work of art, *i.e.* according to "the art model of appreciation," pluralists believe that this can be just the right thing. Assuming that the art model is a form of artification, pluralists believe that artification is sometimes appropriate, whereas scientific cognitivists reject it. Pluralists also find virtue in the other models rejected by scientific cognitivists, for example, formalism and the aesthetics of engagement, as long as claims of exclusivity are dropped.<sup>[18]</sup> Let me give a concrete example.

### **1. Aquariums**

Aquariums are places people can go to appreciate nature. They pose a problem for scientific cognitivists, however, since aquariums are artificial environments.<sup>[19]</sup> From the scientific cognitivist perspective, the best place to appreciate ocean flora and fauna is in their original ecological context. One might argue that putting flora and fauna on display in a science museum is treating them as though they were works of art. This would explain why the words 'display,' 'exhibit,' and 'museum' are shared between science and art museums. On this view, a science museum display could be seen as an example of artification. It can be replied, however, that aquariums, such as the Monterey Bay Aquarium, are primarily learning centers and are devoted to teaching science. So, if one holds the scientific cognitivist model of nature appreciation, then one might argue that aquariums provide the opportunity to increase the appropriate appreciation of natural phenomena through providing significant

background knowledge that might well be unavailable if one were a scientifically ignorant person diving in the ocean. Moreover, ocean diving is a sport limited to a small number, and thus nature appreciation is more available to the rest of us by display in such museums. However, for this approach to work, it may be argued, viewers should be discouraged from seeing objects displayed in aquariums from an art-like perspective. In this context, artification is a danger for aquariums.

Also, one of the characteristic ways we look at works of art is to focus on aesthetic qualities. One of the most highly-regarded of such qualities is beauty, and visitors to aquariums often find what they see amazingly beautiful. Scientific cognitivists might think there is danger in appreciating the species found in aquariums from the standpoint of such aesthetic qualities as beauty, especially if the qualities picked out by the manner of display are ones that are commonly stressed by works of art. For instance, it is sometimes argued that all species are of equal value, that aquariums should be teaching this truth, and so aquariums should not focus their displays on species that humans typically find beautiful at the expense of species that they do not. It could be argued that even species that are not widely regarded as beautiful are still equally beautiful in their own way or if seen with the right background knowledge. This could be called the "equality of beauty thesis."[\[20\]](#)

The idea that each individual is beautiful regardless of any deformity seems like a contradiction. However, there is something to be said for the equality of beauty thesis if we are talking not about individuals but about species. That is, although one could talk about a particular individual as ugly because of poor health or deformity, one also has to recognize that there is an ideal of beauty within each species, and that sexual selection would not even happen if there were not some at least proto-aesthetic response to potential mates on the part of the species members themselves. Something similar could be said about an ideal of cuteness for infants, which, of course, would not be a matter of sexual selection. An argument could be made that each species is equally beautiful and each infant of each species equally cute, even if we humans can't see this.

Yet aquariums do not really work this way. At best, the notion of treating all species, and all sexually or cutely attractive members within each species, as equally beautiful or cute can only be treated as an ideal. But is it worthwhile even as an ideal? I recently visited the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and it was evident that the main emphasis of the museum was on species that were striking and even beautiful from the perspective of the average human. No concern was given to whether they were beautiful from the perspective of the species itself, or from that of other non-human species, for that matter. Humans, sometimes universally, and sometimes relative to culture and time, just happen to be more attracted to some species than to others. Although aquariums may have other goals, they cannot exist without their attractions.

## **2. Monterey Bay Aquarium exhibits**

In particular, the Monterey Bay Aquarium has a very popular exhibit of jelly-fish that is, to me, mind-boggling in its beauty. This is also true for the exhibits of sea-horses and sea-dragons, and also of sea anemones. Not everything that attracts viewers is necessarily beautiful. Although some might find a great white shark beautiful, others might consider it too scary or ugly. However, we have another term to describe the positive aesthetic effect of the great white shark, which is "sublime." It terrifies and astounds and yet also delights us, if we are not in danger. These are exactly the terms that Edmund Burke first used to describe the sublime.[\[21\]](#)

If it were not for the jelly-fish, the sea horses, the sharks, and other aesthetically interesting species, I would frankly not think it worth my time and money to visit this aquarium. Nor am I alone in this; others flock to the most aesthetically striking exhibits. So it appears that despite all the talk about appreciation according to science, or even seeing every species as equally beautiful, the fact is that certain species are striking to us humans in their beauty, and we gain particular pleasure in visiting aquariums because of their beauty. I am not denying that some sea cucumber specialist might find great beauty in these creatures and rush past the jelly-fish to



catch a glimpse of them. There is a great variety in taste. It is just that for the average viewer, what is most striking about this kind of museum is the display of aesthetic qualities that are loved by most humans, like the iridescent colors and graceful languid moves of the jelly-fish.

It might be said that this way of talking amounts to an aestheticization of nature. It might even be said that, since such qualities are often featured in art, this amounts to the artification of nature. If so, I do not think aestheticization or artification in these cases is bad. It would only be bad if it produced overall bad consequences, for example, if it led in some way to widespread species elimination or the rejection of scientific knowledge. It is even arguable that artification and aestheticization are, in general, good for environmentalism. The argument would be based on the idea that these practices have evolutionary roots based on the human need for a sense of community with nature. This view could be derived from Jennifer McMahon's recent claim that "aesthetic experience, through the evocation of aesthetic ideas, fuels a sense of continuity with nature and community," and that aesthetic experiences "bring us into contact with an evolutionary imperative – the need to feel continuous with nature rather than alienated from it and to feel continuous with community." [22]

### **3. The philosophy of aquarium display**

A particular location of the debate over aestheticization and artification is over philosophies of museum display. Cognitivists would insist that displays should focus on teaching us how creatures and ecologies function, and that aesthetic experience should only derive from this. However, the Monterey Bay Aquarium has sometimes designed exhibits in ways that closely relate to art. For example, one exhibit I saw during my last visit shows small fish swimming in a column-shaped pool. The exhibit is strikingly beautiful, and it gives one a good up-close view of the fish. However, it does not feature scientific information. I could imagine that this exhibit was designed by an artist or by someone very aware of practices in contemporary video art.

More interesting in relation to this debate are exhibits in which art works are juxtaposed against displays of certain species. This was done recently with the jelly-fish at an exhibit titled "Jellies: Living Art," which appeared in 2008.[23] The exhibit featured a juxtaposition of works of art and works of nature. One art work at the entrance to the exhibit was a large glass display by Dale Chihuly. This style of exhibit does not just treat natural objects as art but recognizes the interaction of artists and their natural sources of inspiration. The blurb for the show asked us to observe how the marine environment has inspired artists. It stressed both the graceful qualities of the jellies and the experience of innovative art work. Chihuly's installation, which was called "Seaform," filled a large case at the entrance of the exhibit. It was intended, as the exhibit web site put it, to immediately immerse visitors in a way that cued them to "the different or unexpected nature" of the exhibit.[24] The curator probably wanted to get us to see how viewing the art works and jellies together may benefit our experience of each. Scientific cognitivists would complain that this exhibit encourages us to perceive the properties of the jellies through categories that are not those to which they in fact belong, that is, art-related categories. This would be a case of artification of nature.

But is seeing something in terms of a category to which it does not belong necessarily a bad thing? Although this is assumed to be true by most scientific cognitivists, the thesis limits creativity. When we creatively see something, whether in art or in science, we see it in terms of a category to which it does not literally belong. We can call such seeing "metaphorical perception." To say "Man is a wolf to man." is to see man in terms of a category to which he does not belong. Nonetheless, when elaborated, this metaphor presents a possibly valuable thesis concerning the nature of man. Many studies in the philosophy of science, the philosophy of art, and linguistics show that metaphorical perception plays an important role in cognition. Should we exclude such perception from appreciation of the natural environment? Even if we assume that something absolutely belongs in a specific category, which is open to question, since it assumes that categories are not human constructions, it is not clear that it has to always be seen in terms of that category.

Another complaint against exhibits in which flora and fauna are portrayed like works of art is that they encourage the observer to passive appreciation. It is often argued that contemplation, aesthetic attitude, and disinterestedness theories assume a passive approach, and that these are the approaches most commonly taken to works of art. I do not think any philosopher has ever favored contemplation as being passive, certainly not Kant or Bell, both of whom have been accused of this.<sup>[25]</sup> Maybe what is meant is that some philosophers wrongly favor *physically* passive contemplation of aesthetic objects. Although this may be true, it should be noted that aquarium visitors who follow the scientific cognitivist model are likely to be just as physically passive as ones who appreciate the objects as like works of art.

It is commonly argued that only the scientific cognitivist model treats its objects seriously, whereas looking at natural objects from an art perspective is to trivialize them. First, it is not clear that we should always treat things seriously in order to appreciate their aesthetic qualities. In fact, too much seriousness would probably hinder at least some types of aesthetic appreciation. Second, the opposite of serious attention is not necessarily trivial attention. Humorous things are not serious, but neither are they always trivial. Third, and most importantly, if someone follows the art model in appreciating a marine animal, and if the resultant experience is profound (as in the case of Melville's appreciation of whales), then it is not trivial. Scientific cognitivists who insist that their approach is the only serious one and that all others are trivial seem narrow-minded. As opposed to scientific cognitivism, I prefer the view that one can use any method of appreciation that gives good results, and this includes art-related in addition to scientific cognitivist methods, or aesthetic pluralism. Aesthetic pluralism allows for the distinction between more or less serious forms of appreciation but does not see the mark of seriousness as equivalent to having scientific knowledge of the object being appreciated.<sup>[26]</sup>

Scientific cognitivism is attractive in that it encourages aesthetic experiences that are in accord not only with the values of modern science but with the ethical demands of the environmentalist movement. Since these values and demands are admirable, the value of the scientific cognition, as a limited component of aesthetic pluralism, should not be downplayed. However, although the natural sciences may now seem to be deeply allied with environmentalism, there is no necessary connection between the two. Science cannot really tell us which ecosystems should be given our highest priority in conservation efforts. It can only tell us that if you want this, then you will also need to have that; that is, if you want to preserve whales, you will also need to preserve what they eat.

Also, although scientific cognitivists claim to avoid anthropocentrism in a way that art-related models fail to do, it is not clear that this is so. Scientific cognitivism relies on a product of humanity, that is, on science, as much as art-related models rely on art. Isn't it a deeper form of anthropocentrism to assume that the objective view of scientifically-trained humans is independent of its creation by humans? Doing so projects a human-centered way of seeing things, as though it were un-human or transcending the human, a particularly clever strategy for this species.

After looking at Chihuly's work one might well see the jelly-fish in the exhibit differently. One might focus visually on certain iridescent colors, for example. This is a prime example of the aestheticization of nature based on artification. It makes a non-art object, the jelly-fish, into something art-like or art-affected. Is this a bad thing? I don't think so. It might be bad if every exhibit began with the view of an art object. However, this has not happened and is unlikely to happen. Indeed, when I viewed the jelly-fish recently there were no art works present. What I insist on is that certain aspects of the jelly-fish might well be noticed only after viewing the Chihuly artwork. Unlike the scientific cognitivist, who believes that there is only one right way to appreciate jelly-fish, and that way must be science-determined, I believe that human-centered aestheticization, even the artification of jelly-fish, can be valuable.

#### 4. The souvenir shop

But let us turn now to another part of the aquarium, the souvenir store. Here, images of various species are reproduced in a variety of formats: glass, ceramics, t-shirts, towels, toys, and so on. Many of these artifacts are clearly kitsch; they play on sentimentality and discourage serious reflection. The animals depicted are chosen not simply for their beauty but for their cuteness. This might be considered another sort of artification. It would be a form of artification if kitsch is seen as a kind of art. It is artification in the sense that non-art things, for example fish and sea-horses, are turned into something art-like through the medium of artistic representation.

From a cognitivist perspective, this is an intrusion of art into a learning center that is supposed to provide context for the appropriate appreciation of nature. Unlike the scientific cognitivist, my problem with the museum store is not with artification as such but with artification that focuses on making things art-like on the level of kitsch. It is crass when people are encouraged to reduce their experience of a seal to a furry purchasable item. This is a superficial form of artification. I do not deny that some rare items in such gift stores might rise to the level of art proper, for instance, a particularly elegant vase. Even then, however, it is arguable that this artification reduces aesthetic experience of nature to pleasure in a mere commodity. Moreover, the placement of a genuine art object in a world of kitsch commodities reduces its art-like aesthetic impact.

### **5. Surface vs. deep artification**

So what is the distinction between surface and deep artification? Surface artification includes "aesthetics" in the sense that Postrel gives it. It treats things as art but only with reference to surface features of art. Thus, it focuses on sensuous qualities, the decorative, the ornamental, and the stylish. It includes (1) many but not all products that act as superstimuli; (2) the expensive kitchen stove that is never used but is treated like a painting; (3) the kitsch in the aquarium shop; and (4) examples of prettification and beautification. Surface artification is not necessarily a bad thing. As Postrel has argued, it often serves to shape identity and thus give meaning to lives.

However, in many instances, focusing on surface artification takes us away from deeper, more meaningful experience. Deep artification draws on features of art related to meaning, self-consciousness, reflection on one's culture, and exploration of the human condition. Everyday non-art objects, when they artify in a deep way, become potential art objects. For example, as graffiti crossed the boundary between surface and deep artification, it became a candidate for art gallery representation and museum shows, that is, it became a candidate for art.

### **Concluding comments**

I want to conclude by making a stab at what I think artification should be at its best. (I am going to give this a somewhat personal slant through reflection on my social role as a philosophy professor). I believe that our society suffers from an excess of superficiality. This can be seen, for example, in the way that advertising increasingly dominates our lives. A recent documentary on product-placement in movies, *Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* (2011), exemplifies this transformation of our experience. Even one of our most important art forms, the cinema, is not only usually an aestheticized commodity itself but also contains and promotes products that themselves are aestheticized commodities. Superstimuli abound in this atmosphere.

There is also evidence that our attention-spans are shortening as multi-tasking becomes more common in an internet dominated age. A study of heavy vs. light media multitaskers showed that "heavy multitaskers were much more easily distracted, had significantly less control over their working memory, and were generally much less able to concentrate on a task." [27] Neuroscientist Susan Greenfield has warned that use of computer games and social networking sites could lead to shorter attention spans, and may have already done so.[28] Under these conditions, contemplation is becoming a thing of the past, and various rich skills both in the folk tradition and in the lives of the cultural elite are gradually disappearing. We

seldom attend to the deeper meaning of things any more.

Most of my work as a philosopher and as a teacher is directed against this trend. This carries over into my commitment to the subdisciplines of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. I explore and teach these fields because I believe that art at its best has powers similar to philosophy at its best. Art still has the capacity, among other things, to make us aware of ordinary everyday objects on a different level, even when those objects are the very commodities that impoverish our lives when approached non-reflectively. We might not pay much attention to the play of light in our dining room until one day we spend some time with a painting by Bonnard. We might see the typical items found in a garage, like tires, gasoline, and so on,, differently after seeing a work by Fischli and Weiss. We might understand a brand-new vacuum cleaner differently after seeing it incorporated into a work by Jeff Koons. And we might appreciate a fish in a new way after having viewed Winslow Homer's "Life-Size Black Bass" (1904).<sup>[29]</sup>

Seeing the world and our lives in that world in terms of art is a form of artification. If and when artification involves paying attention to the deeper, richer meanings of things, it is an enhancement of life. Philosophy, I believe, should teach us something about the art of living. This view, promoted by the great Hellenistic philosophers, particularly the Stoics and the Epicureans, needs revival. If living life well is an art, then artification, at its best, is actually a matter of treating life itself and the objects of life as if they are works of art in the way that such writers as Dewey and Nietzsche suggested. Artification in this sense should be humanity's highest aspiration.

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### Endnotes

[1] *Aesthetics of the Unavoidable: Aesthetic Variations in Human Appearance* (Helsinki: International Institute of Applied Aesthetics, 1998), p. 203.

[2] This quote is from the original prompt for the articles in this issue.

[3] Urban Dictionary, 'artify,' <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=artify>, accessed May 23, 2010.

[4] Patrick Burgoyne, "São Paulo: The City That Said No To Advertising," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, News & Features (June 18, 2007) [http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/jun2007/id20070618\\_505580.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/jun2007/id20070618_505580.htm), accessed July 8, 2011.

[5] Diana Crane, "Fashion and art: unraveling a complex relationship," *Convegno Internazionale Moda e Arte*, 2008, Milan, [http://centridiricerca.unicatt.it/modacult\\_CRANE2020Comple20relationship.pdf](http://centridiricerca.unicatt.it/modacult_CRANE2020Comple20relationship.pdf), accessed May 21, 2011.

[6] Crane, "Fashion."

[7] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[8] See Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage Publications, 1991) especially his chapter, "The Aestheticization of Everyday Life," pp.

65-82. See also, Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics*, tr. Andrew Inkpin (London: Sage, 1997), Chapter 1, "Aestheticization Process."

[9] Deirdre Barrett, *Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

[10] Barrett, *Supernormal Stimuli*, 169-170.

[11] Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture and Consciousness* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003) 76.

[12] Philosophers will find this use of the term 'aesthetics' disorienting, since she does not mean by it either "A set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, esp. in art" or "The branch of philosophy that deals with the principles of beauty and artistic taste." See google.com "aesthetics+definition," accessed July 8, 2011. However, it is not at all an unusual usage.

[13] Postrel, *Substance*.

[14] Peg Zeglin Brand, "Feminism in Context," *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, eds. John Bender, H. Gene Blocker (New York: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 106-113.

[15] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy in Basic Writings of Nietzsche* tr. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 22. What he actually says is that the existence of the world is only justified aesthetically, a more metaphysical and anti-Christian point than I want to make here.

[16] Allen Carlson is a leading advocate of this view. See his *Nature and Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[17] John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), pp. 365-366.

[18] Arnold Berleant is the leading advocate of the aesthetics of engagement. See his *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

[19] These comments were originally developed in response to a paper by Nola Semczyszyn, "Below the Surface: Aesthetic Appreciation and the Marine Environment" delivered at the American Society for Aesthetics, Pacific Division Meeting, Asilomar, California, 2011. Semczyszyn's paper drew my attention to issues of aquariums. In her paper she advocated scientific cognitivism and critiqued art-related aquarium displays from that position.

[20] This should be distinguished from the broader thesis called "positive aesthetics," which claims that *everything* in nature has significant aesthetic value). See Glenn Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 57-65.

[21] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Philips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[22] Jennifer A. McMahon, "Critical Aesthetic Realism," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 45, 2 (2011), 49-69, ref. on pp. 66-67.

[23] Monterey Bay Aquarium,  
[http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/efc/efc\\_se/se\\_jla.aspx](http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/efc/efc_se/se_jla.aspx), accessed March 12, 2011, but no longer up.

[24] Monterey Bay Aquarium, the same web site as above.

[25] Early Croce is a possible exception. See Merle E. Brown, "Croce's Early Aesthetics: 1894-1912," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 22, 1 (1963), 29-41. Emily Brady insists, correctly, that Kant's disinterestedness thesis is not committed to passive contemplation in her "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56:2, Special

Issue: Environmental Aesthetics (1998), 139-147, ref. on p. 147.

[26] Parsons discusses this view in his chapter, "Pluralism," in *Aesthetics and Nature*.

[27] Nicholas Carr, "The Web Shatters Focus, Rewires Brains," *Wired* (June 2010) accessed July 7, 2011, [http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/ff\\_nicholas\\_carr/2/](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/ff_nicholas_carr/2/)  
See also Roger Ebert, "The quest for *frisson*," *Roger Ebert's Journal*, May 29, 2010, [http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/05/the\\_french\\_word\\_frisson\\_descri.html#more](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/05/the_french_word_frisson_descri.html#more), accessed July 8, 2011.

[28] David Derbyshire, "Social websites harm children's brains: Chilling warning to parents from top neuroscientist," *Daily Mail* (Feb. 24, 2009), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1153583/Social-websites-harm-childrens-brains-Chilling-warning-parents-neuroscientist.html#ixzz1RShcIVy4>, accessed July 7, 2011.

[29] The Art Institute of Chicago, <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/homer/artwork/189152>, accessed June 8, 2011.

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