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Zhuofei Wang

School of Art and Design, Kassel, Germany, zfw@uni-kassel.de

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An Interview with Gernot Böhme

Zhuofei Wang

Gernot Böhme (1937-) is a well-known contemporary German philosopher whose research interests cover classical philosophy, philosophy of science, theory of time, natural philosophy, philosophy of technical civilization, philosophical anthropology, ethics and aesthetics. From 1977 to 2002 he was Professor of Philosophy at Technical University of Darmstadt. Since 2005 he has been director of the Institute for Practical Philosophy (IPPH) in Darmstadt. Beginning in the late 1980s, Böhme developed the theory "ecological aesthetics of nature" (*Ökologische Naturästhetik*), which has already had a wide influence on current research in German-speaking countries. His major works in this area are (a) *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989); (b) *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995); (c) *Die Natur vor uns. Naturphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (Kusterdingen: SFG Servicecenter, 2002); (d) *Leibsein als Aufgabe. Leibphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (Kusterdingen: SFG Servicecenter, 2003).

As a response to the current environmental debate, Böhme's ecological aesthetics of nature is based on a general theory of perception (*Allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*). He emphasizes the concrete human bodily experience in a special environment and gives priority to the original coexistent relationship between human and nature. With this theory, Böhme attempts to underline the idea that humans are a part of nature. He argues that we should abandon modern practices that tend to control and exploit the resources of nature and instead should actively promote the integration of human and ecological elements.

On January 28th 2014, Professor Böhme gave a presentation at the School of Arts and Design in Kassel (Kunsthochschule Kassel). On this occasion Dr. Zhuofei Wang interviewed him about the central ideas in his ecological aesthetics of nature. (Editorial note: Since little of Böhme's work is available in English, *Contemporary Aesthetics* encouraged Dr. Wang's proposal to interview Professor Böhme in order to provide scholars outside German-speaking countries an overview of Böhme's ideas.)

Date: January 29th 2014

Place: Stadthotel Kassel, Germany

Interviewee: Professor Dr. Gernot Böhme, Darmstadt University of Technology & Institute for Practice of Philosophy (IPPh), Germany

Interviewer: Dr. Zhuofei Wang, School of Arts and Design, Kassel, Germany

1. Wang: Good morning, Professor Böhme. I'm honored to be able to have this interview with you! Your aesthetic research starts with the critique of the traditional understanding of the term 'nature.' You have pointed out that nature in conventional European discourse has been described as something lying beyond human beings (*„etwas hinter“ dem Menschen „Liegendes“*), as something to be conquered (*als etwas Überwundenes*) and as something to be dismissed as obsolete (*als etwas Obsoletes*).^[1] In contrast, you attempt to establish “nature before us” as a basic principle. Could you please tell us how this principle is applied in your aesthetic practice?

Böhme: The thesis that nature lies beyond us can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous motto, “Back to nature” (*„Revenons à la nature“*). There he postulates that nature refers to a state that is given, and points out that we have already left it; that is to say, we are in the state of civilization. However, the current situation, in my view, is quite different. In the past fifty years, nature has become an intensively discussed topic precisely because we should give ourselves a new direction. Now nature confronts us with a new task to be fulfilled and we still need to investigate further our natural being. Fundamentally we regard ourselves as a “rational animal” (*zoon logon echon*), namely as a kind of being having rationality and language. In this case, animality means something to be overcome. We currently find ourselves in a phase which demands us to integrate our natural being into the self-understanding of human beings. In this sense, natural being and rational being must first be considered as equal. This primarily concerns external nature. We are already living in a cultural and civilized nature, and it is only now that we realize that what has been carried out as the domination of nature is, in fact, a totally impossible project. On the contrary, nature must be recognized as our partner and we should gradually adapt to such a partner relationship.

2. Wang: Since the late 1980s you have been developing the theory of an “ecological aesthetics of nature” (*Ökologische Naturästhetik*). Different from the modern conception, which leads to an alienation from nature, the ecological aesthetics of nature is based on the *general theory of perception* (*Allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*) and strives to integrate *nature in itself* and *nature for us* (*Natur an sich und für uns*). What does this actually mean? What older and contemporary theories have provided inspiration for this research?

Böhme: In my opinion, what really counts is that in our period we should rediscover our identity as natural beings and develop the consciousness that *body is the nature that we ourselves are* (*Der Leib ist die Natur, die wir selbst sind*). I view this as a crucial aspect. We have found ourselves involved in environmental degradation, that is, that our own nature is being affected. This concerns not only the problem of food but also of breathing. External pollution, for example the polluted atmosphere, is threatening our own existence. Moreover, we tend to suffer from cancer caused by the absorption of toxic substances.

The important point is that the destruction of external nature has become a problem for us only when it has affected us and

has been sensed with our own bodies. If this were not the case, one could say that it really does not matter what happens to external nature. What is a product of human behavior towards nature would not change nature as such because, for example, a desert or fallow land as well as the remains of an industrial zone belong to nature, too. In this sense, nature as such is indestructible. But what has been destroyed is *nature for us* (*Natur für uns*). This actually concerns nature as a living space of human beings. In this respect, I hold the view that we should be aware of our own nature in order to tackle environment problems. In this way we may be able to recognize that what we have done to external nature could eventually conflict with our inner nature.

The environment where we live is not an issue only related to nature itself. Instead, our human surroundings should be transformed into a human space, and nature as a living space made worthy of preservation.

3. Wang: In your work *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (*Toward an Ecological Aesthetics of Nature*) published in 1989, the topic of *Being-located in environments* (*Sichbefinden in Umwelten*) is defined as a core theme of aesthetics.^[2] Could you please clarify this finding and its consequences?

Böhme: This deals with the issue that the science of ecology needs some adjustments. First, what interests us in nature is not important for nature as such but for ourselves. We realize that what we are interested in is not nature itself but nature defined by human limits, e.g. as do political borders or property boundaries. Secondly, what nature should be is not dependent on the norms of nature but on the standards established by human beings. For example, although a forest or a field is a part of nature, its situation is determined by various human uses and interests. In this sense, the values we desire to achieve are specified not in the field of nature but of society. That is why we have claimed in Darmstadt that ecology should be a social science (*soziale Naturwissenschaft*),^[3] namely that social norms and social value limits should be introduced into the basic categories of ecology.

A specific point in this connection is the aesthetic aspect. Nature, which is interesting for us and desirable as a human environment, should also be observed from an aesthetic point of view. *Aesthetic viewpoints* (*ästhetische Gesichtspunkte*) do not pay attention only to the issue of whether nature is beautiful or offers us beautiful scenery but also to the fact that nature influences our own feeling of being there (*Befinden*) through our sensibility. With the help of our own bodily feeling (*Befinden*), we can feel the environment in which we are located. So there exists a relation between external conditions and our own body state (*Befindlichkeit*.) I call this relation an aesthetic aspect under which our own environment needs to be considered. And it is atmosphere that brings the human situation (*Befinden*) and the quality of environment together.

In this view, we can affirm that external nature has a certain atmosphere in which we live. At the same time, this atmosphere makes us feel good or not.

4. Wang: In terms of the classical theories, 'environment' mainly concerns non-human nature consisting of organic and

inorganic elements. On the contrary, Professor Arnold Berleant, who is an important contributor to environmental aesthetics, points out that environment refers to a dynamic natural process in which all things participate. In this sense human beings are in a continuous symbiotic relationship with their surroundings. Berleant emphasizes that humans cannot be separated from the natural environment and that there exists a single, complex situation, the human environment. Do you share this opinion?

Böhme: I view Ernst Bloch's concept of *alliance-technique* (*Allianztechnik*) as a guiding principle in this respect. Bloch coined this term in his book, *The Principle of Hope* (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*). As regards his claim, he postulated that mankind was expected to develop such a technique, that is, such a relationship with nature that, in today's sense, it would be sustainable. However, it should be mentioned that a catastrophic divergence has destroyed what could be a symbiotic human-nature coexistence. The integration of human activity and natural development is being constantly threatened and is getting out of control. We call these environmental disasters, which are not only threatening us but are already at hand. We define these as environmental catastrophes because external nature has been altered through human activities, namely through production and consumption, so that it will eventually hardly any longer be a human living space.

So we should demand here what was achieved in traditional agriculture. A peasant arranged his field in such a way that in the course of the year the field could return to the state from which it came, so that the next cycle could start again. This tells us that a wonderful symbiotic relationship in fact existed in traditional agricultural society. Today, on the contrary, in the industrial agriculture that we have, such a sustainable human-nature relationship must first be established. Now the problem is that we have to develop patterns of production and consumption that understand nature as a partner in an interdependent sense. In other words, this means that we always co-produce nature in our own production processes. Namely, we must transfer nature again to a status, generally its initial status, in which further production is possible, and we must see ourselves as a part of the reproductive processes of external nature.

5. Wang: The ecological aesthetics of nature reflects the human-nature interaction against the background of technological civilization. In your opinion, nature in our technological era means "not a counterpart to the culture of technology"^[4] but primarily in relation to the design of a human environment. How would you respond to the criticism that such a concept oriented towards subjective aesthetic needs represents a retrograde step toward the traditional subject-centered theory?

Böhme: The Norwegian ecologist *Arne Næss* (1912-2009) was of the opinion that we should overcome human-centered thinking. Thinkers like him are so radical because they try to reverse the relationship that has existed for hundreds of years and demand that we should take care of nature, as such. The welfare of nature itself is of importance and we, as humankind,

have to put ourselves aside. This is completely absurd! The fact is that what in Europe is esteemed and protected as nature is not nature in itself. We have no wilderness. In traditional American stories we can find descriptions of wilderness because what immigrants met as nature was in fact wilderness. Therefore in the US, it can be argued that nature as wilderness should be protected. In Europe, by contrast, what people find good about nature is always cultivated nature. This is actually the old culturally affected nature that we know and find good here; in other words, this concerns what is considered as landscape, etc.

However, this is not nature in itself. In this respect I would say there is a requirement, first from a historical and second from a practical standpoint, that we have a cultural environment, namely a human environment around us and not just wilderness. What is the point of not allowing anyone to enter a preserve? And for what reason? This actually cannot be the goal! Such considerations are not really related to environmental issues and politics. What counts is rather a balanced relationship, as mentioned above under the concept of "alliance-technique" (*Allianztechnik*). According to this, cultivated nature is the type of nature that should be taken seriously. Nature should be accepted and at the same time valued as an independent partner. The reason for this is that people have overloaded themselves with the project of dominating nature. However, total management of nature cannot be realized at all, for we should be fully conscious of the spontaneity and self-reproduction forces of nature.

6. Wang: Under the influence of cultural relativism, quite a number of aestheticians are now of the opinion that the aesthetic contemplation of nature actually does not follow a universal pattern but is influenced by the cultural tradition of interpretation that is permeated with particular historical, social, and psychological elements. What do you think of this viewpoint? Wouldn't it be easy to come to the conclusion that nature-related experience should only be evaluated in terms of the associated cultural understanding and could be considered as inadequate or inaccurate if it is judged from other cultural perspectives?

Böhme: I think your questions should be answered from two aspects. There seems to be a kind of relativism if one pleads for a cultural nature. Seen from a historical perspective, such cultivated nature is connected with a given culture from Europe, Asia, or America, etc., and could be considered acceptable. At the same time, this also means that the nature in which we are interested is usually regional, that is to say, it doesn't concern the whole world but regions and landscapes.

However, from an ecological point of view, the world should obviously be regarded as a whole, as well. In this sense, wholeness is indispensable. Thus there is an ecological dimension that is related to the entirety of the world. Take, for example, the ozone layer at the two poles: One is fighting against its disappearance, with the help of the enforcement of a worldwide ban or reduction of the FCKW gas emission, so that it could regenerate.

Today we have other problems, such as climate change and slowly rising temperature, as well. All of these are deemed to

be global issues, namely, they do not refer to a matter of the cultural imprints of landscapes but to the cosmos as a whole.

An ecosystem that encompasses the whole earth should be guided into stability and preserved to make human life possible. As to the slow heating of atmosphere, we realize that this is not true. The melting of polar ice has been leading to higher water levels, so that the entire landscapes and countries around the Pacific region are being threatened.

These environmental problems have affected large parts of mankind and must be overcome.

What is preferable is a world climate that allows human life and well being, at least in large areas of the earth. Thus people would like to contribute to the maintenance of this climate. That means they will have to defend against those environmental problems that are attributed to their own activities. For our lives, we need an environment that is favorable for us. This actually is an international environmental problem.

7. Wang: Nowadays, the sphere of art has already gone beyond its traditional limits and occurs in new manifestations, such as urban design, advertisement, new media and micro-techniques. As far as the development of an aesthetics of nature is concerned, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between natural and artistic forms in cases like urban design, architecture, and bio-artifacts. How can we understand the contemporary relationship between artistic and natural aesthetic values? To what extent would an aesthetic analysis benefit from such an artistic extension?

Böhme: Generally speaking, it is clear that art is obviously something quite independent of other human activities and of human nature. This is called the autonomy of art. But today we are dealing with arts that are environmentally relevant and devote themselves to environmental problems. This mainly refers to art forms manifesting natural processes themselves.

I call this "ephemeral art" (*ephemere Kunst*),^[5] for example, those works that deliberately expose themselves to nature and thereby let nature contribute to the creation of the art. Take Fridhelm Klein as an example. He lets his paintings be flooded by waves. Here a natural process has been imposed on the form of the artwork itself and it shows the effect of nature being employed in a specific realm of art. To take another example, there is a type of art showing natural processes by introducing natural objects like plants, trees, etc. into the work. Of course there are also other kinds of art that draw attention to the destruction of nature.

My last example is the great project, "Soundscape," which records acoustic landscapes. For one thing, such recordings preserve for us the natural environment in the form of acoustic records. For another, they remind us that we ourselves live in a natural acoustic environment that may even be the basis of our feeling at home. Yet another result of the "Soundscape" project is to create an awareness of this aspect of environment. Of course, this also concerns life in the city and actually relates to the issue of urban ecology. Environment here is not just mother nature but also urban environment.

With the help of the "Soundscape" and acoustic installations, people are once again being made aware of the fact that they

live in an audible environment and begin to develop an interest in it. And in the urban design the following question must be posed: *How should the environment be further developed?*

Wang: Professor Böhme, many thanks for this interview and all the best for the future!

(Introduction and translation by Zhuofei Wang.)

Zhuofei Wang
zfw@uni-kassel.de

Dr. Zhuofei Wang is an academic assistant at the School of Art and Design in Kassel, Germany. Dr. Wang successfully created a partnership between the School of Art and Design in Kassel, Germany and the School of Arts of Peking University in China. She is currently working on the topic of *Öko-Ästhetik: Eine Alternative zur gegenwärtigen Ästhetik* (Green Aesthetics: an Alternative to the Current Aesthetics) at the School of Art and Design in Kassel.

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Endnotes

[1] Gernot Böhme: *Die Natur vor uns: Naturphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (Kusterdingen: SFG Servicecenter, 2002), pp. 9.

[2] Gernot Böhme: *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), p. 9.

[3] Gernot Böhme mit E. Schramm als hrsg.: *Soziale Naturwissenschaft. Wege zur Erweiterung der Ökologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1985).

[4] Gernot Böhme: *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), p. 12.

[5] Gernot Böhme: *Die sanfte Kunst des Ephemeren* (Essen: Verlag der fadbk, 2008). Also in Mira Fliescher, Fabian Goppelsröder, Dieter Mersch (hrsg.): *Sichtbarkeiten I. Erscheinen. Zur Praxis des Präsentiven* (Berlin: diaphanes 2013), pp.87-108.