



## Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Contemporary Public Art Under the Vision of Ecological Aesthetics

LI Xiaoguang<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Academy of Fine Arts, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China.  
\* Corresponding author.

Received 15 February 2014; accepted 21 May 2014  
Published online 25 June 2014

### Abstract

The ecological idea of contemporary public art design plays a due function value in terms of urban ecological planning and design, coordinating the relations between art and life, and cultural construction. The systematic theory of ecological aesthetics is required in supporting the action of promoting public art construction in natural environment so as to elevate the public sense of participation in arts. The application of ecological aesthetics in public art creation and criticism of natural environment embodies both theoretical basis and profound sociological meaning, being capable of effectively improving the creation level of public art in natural environment from two aspects of content and form and thus better advancing the harmonious development between man and nature.

**Key words:** Public art; Ecological aesthetics

LI, X. G. (2014). Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Contemporary Public Art Under the Vision Of Ecological Aesthetics. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(4), 63-68. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/4808>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4808>

From the view of a rapid development trend at present, the urban responsibility and value form carried by the public art both have gone beyond the scope of traditional aesthetics. The public art study in the traditional sense is unfolded basically with focus on the two dimensions of “artistry” and “publicness”, stressing on its form of art and sociology. The urbanization process in late 20th century and the resulting environmental problems, environmental

awareness of “sustainable development” and ecological thinking have effectively changed dimensionality of public art, and the public art study begins to stretch into the field of ecological aesthetics (also called environmental aesthetics), from which the idea of “ecological design” is derived.

The contemporary public art creation deconstructs the grandiose narration function carried by traditional art to a large extent, and always insists on the publicness and openness as the spiritual core of its own essential attributes. In form, it is featured by multi-media, multi-formation and multi-perspective, while in design, it gives full consideration to the recovery and improvement of ecosystem. It obviously becomes a design philosophy admitted by various countries in the world as well as an attractive choice to advance the ecological construction of public art in natural environment and human settlement so as to improve the cultural image of city. This behavior of emphasizing the harmonious development between man and environment has become a common practice and consensus of the current developed countries.

The ecological public art means that the public art must have wide and more conscious ecological vision and thinking rather than the manifestation of ecological theme or the public art that makes creation with ecological materials, consequently, it is an ecological aesthetic conception possessing environmental awareness and ecological aesthetic value in post-modern context. The contemporary public art has gone beyond the scope of pure art and pure aesthetics in terms of urban responsibility and value form, and plays a due function value in terms of urban ecological planning and design, coordinating the relations between art and life, and cultural construction. From this sense, the essential issue of ecological public art lies in how to reconstruct the harmony between man and nature.

## 1. THEORETICAL BASIS FOR GENERATING THE ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS OF CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ART

The running of human society requires to be guaranteed by the balanced development of ecosystem, and the human itself is only a subsystem of the ecosystem. The in-depth exploration into the relationship between man and nature is put forwards along with the development of philosophy and ecology. We observe that early in ancient times, the Taoist school of China had elucidated the important philosophical thought of “Heaven and earth co-exist with me, and I am identified with everything in the universe.” (Chuang Tzu) and this opinion of Taoist ideas contains underlying ecological awareness: The human, biology and environment are equal and are of an integral whole. These two points correspond to the two core principles of modern ecology: ecology-centered principle and ecological equilibrium principle. In addition, the development of modern western ecology and the environmental protection campaigns provide theoretical background for the proposing and development of ecological aesthetics.

Ecology is the study concerning interspecific relationship, community succession and ecosystem, revealing the interdependence between the integrality, diversity and species of the nature. And this conception is changes along with the development of people understanding. After the mid 19 Century Western biologists regard ecology is defined as “a biological organism and the external world, the relationship between the general living conditions of science” (Haeckel, 2000, p.3). The American ecologist Eugene Pleasants Odum (1913-2002) considered that the biology and environment should be studied as a whole, defining the ecology as “science of studying ecosystem structure and function”(Odum, 1953). In 1935, the English ecologist Sir Arthur George Tansley (1871-1955) proposed the concept of ecosystem: “Ecosystem is the whole system, ... including not only the organism-complex, but also the whole complex of physical factors forming what we call the environment” (Tansley, 1947, pp.130-137). In a mature ecosystem, the living organisms exchange substances, energy and information with the environment, rendering a balanced and dynamic process, and the whole system is maintained by means of the interaction of such factors. So, the environmental problem of modern society is essentially due to the fact that all correlative factors of ecosystem become unbalanced, and the whole correlation, unity and diversity are damaged.

In late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the industrial civilization causes huge ecological crisis to modern society. The ecological problem shows the negative side of modern technology of instrumental reason, and the anti-nature feature of modern

technology contradicts with the naturality of ecosystem, causing great damage to natural environment. In 1972, Stockholm, Sweden held a “Conference on the human environment” and signed *The Stockholm Declaration on the human environment*, it is a programmatic document on the world first maintenance and improvement of the environment, the meeting decided to June 5th of each year as “world environment day”. In 1982, *Nairobi declaration* pointed out the necessity of environmental management and assessment as well as the significance of guaranteeing the diverse relationship in-between environmental development and population resources: “Only by adopting an integrated and unified approach in the region, in order to make environmentally sound and sustainable development of social economy” (1982). In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) put forward the envisage of “Sustainable development” in *Our Common Future*, its report to the United Nations: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (1987). The view of sustainable development in the 1992 Brazil Rio de Janeiro “United Nations Conference on environment and development” obtained universal approval from the participate conference national. *Rio Declaration on environment and development* formally established the view of sustainable development (1992). The environmental protection campaign exerts influences on the globe rather than only on the biology. The economics, philosophy and daily life are impacted by environmental protection movement to different degrees, with the relevant theory like ecological economy, ecological ethic, ecological literary criticism and others derived, and the ecological environmental protection problem has far gone beyond the academic sector, becoming a common theme of all humans. Against this background, the ecological problem is gradually coming into view of aesthetic research. The organic combination of ecology and aesthetics actually studies the aesthetic problem in the perspective of ecology, absorbs the important viewpoints of ecology into the aesthetics, and reviews the relationship in-between man and nature as well as man and society at the level of aesthetic appreciation so as to resolve the modernization crisis caused by the opposition in-between industrial civilization and natural ecology.

The application of ecological aesthetics on public art rests on two theoretical bases. First, the ecological aesthetics is constructed based on the highly rational and anthropocentric modern reflection of the human, advocating ecological balance and harmonious development. The eco-thinking generated by making public art rooted in natural environment, in it, embodies desires that the human is like to live with the natural environment in harmony, implying post-modern reflection to a certain degree. Hence, the ecological

awareness of contemporary ecological public art and the ecological aesthetics are fundamentally homogenous, sufficient to complement each other in theory and in practice. Second, the human behaviors of ecological public art are not contradictory with the study object of ecological aesthetics. The study of ecological aesthetics broadly includes the ecological aesthetic relationship in-between man and nature, with the natural ecology and the relationship between man and nature as the core and covering the study on social ecology and cultural ecology. From this point, the ecological aesthetics principle also should own a certain sociological significance.

The ecological aesthetics actively explores how to become practical from the perspectives of society, economics and culture in the meanwhile of constantly perfecting and deepening its own theoretical system. In the face of public art creation advanced in natural environment, ecological aesthetics can be organically combined with art aesthetics completely, providing theoretical support at macro and micro levels for the creation and criticism activities in this field. The creation and criticism where ecological aesthetics is applied to natural environment public art have both the practical needs and the theoretical basis.

---

## **2. THE ECOLOGICAL DESIGN PHILOSOPHY OF CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ART**

---

As a popular design philosophy, the “ecological design” of public art focuses on the ecological balance relationship between man and nature, gives full consideration to the environmental factors in each decision of design process, considers as much as possible how to reduce the usage of natural resources, and to ease the environmental burden or the environmental pollution. It is related to the selection and usage of materials, rational exploitation of natural resources and ecological restoration. The ecological design is not only a consideration of technological level, but even more crucial, it is an ideological transformation, requiring the design to give up the novelty in appearance and truly focus on the innovation of functions, materials and craft, and environment friendliness so as to create new public art forms with more responsible ecology awareness. In summary, the ecological design of public art means: to guarantee the environmental objective of sustainable development in the meanwhile of satisfying aesthetic needs of the people.

The coordination of public art design and natural environment also refers to the coordination of public art works and their audiences. It is premised on the concept that the man and the nature live in harmony, the public art is an art work placed in public space or in natural environment, inside which the human can carry out activities on information, vision, touch, auditory

sense, etc., and is identical with the energy exchange of factors of ecosystem, which requires the designers to set up ecological and environmental protection concepts. The public art should start from promoting the virtuous circle of ecosystem, reduce the consumption of resources and energy fundamentally, ensure the material, style and form all conforming to the ecological aesthetic standard, and limit the over-exploitation of energy and materials and the environmental pollution by developing new materials via science and technology. In this way, the public art can attain the ecological maintenance in the meanwhile of realizing aesthetic value, so as to truly beautify the environment, return to nature, and promote the harmonious development of art, man and natural environment.

The ecological environment and its maintenance are related to the people’s life quality and their survival and development. The public art has extraordinary practical significance and historic responsibility in terms of utilizing, cultivating and propagating eco-environment protection consciousness and its aesthetic consciousness. In Euramerican developed countries, the cultivation and propagation of modern ecology awareness are being realized in societal approaches including artistic means. On one hand, implement environmental protection and energy saving through advanced science and technology, and on the other hand, draw up nutrition from the ecological ethic generated in the era of natural economy, overcome the people’s notions of independence and superiority against the nature, and conduct theoretical reflection in the long-term process of social practice, rendering a practical significance of utmost importance.

---

## **3. THE SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF APPLYING ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS IN PUBLIC ART DESIGN**

---

### **3.1 Reconstruct the Harmony Between Man and Nature**

It is the social function and aesthetic value orientation actively emphasized by the present public art to reconstruct the harmony and ecological balance between man and nature. The public art should actively incorporate creation concepts of ecological aesthetics, eliminating the ecological environmental problems brought in by the development of modern society.

In the field of traditional aesthetics, art works are the most important aesthetic objects, and along with the rise of ecological aesthetics, the natural environment is becoming an aesthetic object. The natural landscape itself has its own intrinsic value and diverse aesthetic qualities, and the positive aesthetics insists that all natural objects possess overall and positive aesthetic value in essence. The design should conform to the nature, which requires

that the public art works should obey the law of nature and get rid of the consciousness of controlling the nature, therefore, the final principle of public art ecological design lies in opposing simplification, respecting the diversity of nature, making the public art landscape and natural environment unified and coordinated, embodying ecological connotation, and forming a cultural ecological character conforming to the natural landscape.

Public space and the birth of existence, not from physical space range established the delimitation of, but because of the people living needs and behavior. In a certain sense, points of public space construction, is to adapt to the specific needs of the community and facilitate exchanges. The French art critic Catherine Grout proposed the “implant” concept against the contemporary landscape and the public art practice principles in her book *Pour de l'art dans notre quotidien*, the “reception”, “communication”, “embed”, “harmony”, “multivariant”, “process” in six main aspects of the function and the value of cultural significance(Grout, 2005). Where the art intervention in space is not of simply or roughly hard transplantation and superficial imitation, but grows up and is rooted in the original ecosystem of specific regions, places and context, forming a corresponding relationship with the local nature and social history as well as the whole ecosystem and integrating with them in a natural and wonderful way rather than abrupt and isolated self-display. For the intervention of public art landscape in natural space, we must study all the related factors generated by the surrounding geographical environment and the natural resources and space, and pay attention to the complexity and correlation of such factors as well as their own inherent aesthetic value. We should make in-depth study on factors of exterior space of ecological environment like soil, rock, water body, vegetation, sunlight, etc., integrate and utilize all resources, and end the estrangement in-between man and environment so as to make the public truly integrated in art works and in the whole landscape system. In the meanwhile, the public art works emphasize their own integrity, openness, and restraining, present a natural and spontaneous style in the sense of form and in color, seek for harmony and unity with the surrounding natural environment, and keep implicit and restraint in style and language so as to introduce pleasurable aesthetic experience at peace and in harmony.

In order to embody the people’s good faith in living in harmony with nature, the materials of public art should be chosen from the natural materials that can naturally degrade and disperse along with the changes of circumstances, and are applied by adopting the method causing the minimum damage to nature so as to minimize the changes, influences and damages to environment. Many public art works and urban landscape utilize the abandoned land and industrial abandoned sites to serve new functions, significantly saving the resources and

reducing the consumption of energy. This method can reduce the damage on natural environment. The public art applies the methods of ecological renovation and regeneration and relies on artistic conception, arrangement and combination to transform the urban ruins into public landscape and attain the perfect combination with natural environment. After the highly industrial and economically predatory resource exploitation, the interrelation between the modern urban construction and the maintaining of natural ecology has become social issues that the contemporary disciplines like sociology, natural ethics, cultural anthropology, etc. have to urgently dispose of.

### 3.2 Coordinate the Relationship Between Art and Life

The ecology awareness of postmodernism goes beyond the technology-dominated industrial society. Martin Heidegger explored the aesthetic issues from the perspectives of art and existence relationship, and constructed new aesthetic mode from perspectives of homeland consciousness, ecological literature, environmental envision and ecological aesthetic education. The so-called “poetically man dwells” exactly refers to exist aesthetically, aiming at resist the vanishing of personality and the dissimulation of spirit brought in by science and technology through life artistry and poetic survival.

The traditional aesthetics focuses on factors like gracefulness and harmony of artistic form, while the postmodernism art decomposes the aesthetic form of traditional art and closes the psychological distance in-between the art and audiences. The ecological aesthetics acts as a kind of ontology, breaking various restrictions of formal beauty, and the life artistry becomes one of the aesthetic pursuits with ubiquitous aesthetic ideas.

The cultural transformation of postmodernism art causes the functions of art to change. It is deemed as an important characteristic of postmodernism to deconstruct the grandiose narration. The art works walk out of studio and exhibition halls and gradually blend in actual life of the public. The discourse style of individualism and elitism in modernism art is replaced by the one of increasingly diversity and plebification, and the art changes into seeking more effective interaction from the past classical expression means as well. The people rethink the relationship between art and life, re-emphasize the intervention of art in social life, and stress on the care of art on reality.

The influences of postmodern thoughts on art also extend to the contemporary public art field, and the plebification trend and the life aestheticization trend of contemporary public art start out from the two corresponding base points, together building up a bridge in-between art and life.

The postmodernism quality of public art means that the distance between art and life is further shortened, and the public art integrates ecological aesthetics thinking on



the basis of publicness and openness characteristics. As an artistic form combining the art works and public life, the public art does not only get rid of the sense of divinity of traditional art, but also create a living environment rich in cultural connotation, leading the common people to get close to art and even to participate in the creation process of art, endowing the people with equal rights of appreciation, judgment and communication, subtly influencing the people's aesthetic idea and behavior style, and making specific humane connotation blended in living environment, so as to maximize the care on humanity.

The contemporary public art moves towards from the field of pure art to serving daily life of the public to a great extent. Hence, this is also the inevitable direction and value dimension in which the contemporary public art regulates art and life. In brief, the public art seeks for unifying aesthetic appreciation and ecological maintenance by utilizing the multicultural co-fusion through the spatial attribute and discourse connotation created by accommodating the public and integrating the social ecological environment. The generation of such connotation of principle is due to that the public art is always kept away from the social life at an interactive distance, and promotes the ecological comprehensive balance in the process of dynamic development.

### **3.3 City Image and Ecological Cultural Landscape Shaping**

The public art correlates the city life with its surrounding natural environment, providing visual and psychological aesthetic pleasure for the people so as to ease the personality suppression and emotional aversion caused by urbanization to the human survival. As an increasingly important form in today's urban development, the public art constructs the cultural landscape of modern city by virtue of the demands on ecologism, and becomes the symbols and representation of city image.

The public art is widely accepted as the symbols of city spirit and cultural value as well as the representation of city image. The American urbanologist Kevin Lynch proposed that any city had the public city image composed of individual images of the public, and summarized five factors of city image: path, edge, district, node and landmark. (Lynch, 2001) Among these factors, the landmark is the reference substance by virtue of which the people experience the exterior space, and is usually marked out with clear concrete objects. When the people try to cognize city, those representative landscapes, buildings, sculptures and others are often preferentially cognized. As an important component in process of urban development, the landmark public art can become key nodes of cohering urban characteristics and sustaining urban space. The public art forms concretely embodies in some buildings, landscape, sculpture, etc. often occupy the people's visual and psychological center, and convey the unique attribute of a city. These urban visual art forms

do not only embody the ontological connotation but also possess cultural implication, and they either demonstrate the urban cultural trait and historical context precipitation, or show and represent the urban cultural spirit and qualities, then being blended together with ideas and needs of the public to ultimately accumulate into tokens and symbols of urban comprehensive image.

The public art only can be recognized and accepted on the basis of deeply understanding the local geographical environment, historic culture and folk custom, thereby elevating the aesthetic dimension of the whole city. The regionalism is a very important characteristic of public art, and a city with regional characteristics can bring in direct and far-reaching influences to the people's memory and values. After the public art show in front of the public, will eventually become the personal experience of their. Visual perception is finished; the mind will be more persistent. The public art can strengthen the people's soul affiliation and perception through highlighting regional cultural characteristics. This does not only protect such folk culture but also endow works with profound cultural flavor and distinct folk features, making the people acquired with spiritual sense of identity and sense of belonging.

The ecological public art are widely blended in the people's life, and as well satisfies aesthetic needs of the modern generation through shaping artistic landscape to create aesthetic value, during which more attentions are paid on the aesthetic taste of works in the meanwhile of meeting functional needs. The public art conveys various values, aesthetic demands and others of the public life with the methods of artistic expressions, which requires that the public artist must fully understand, comprehend and respect the spatial environments of urban public art, and adapt to the people's viewing perspective. The art design explores artistic expression on the base point of ecological balance instead of treating the environment as an opposite object, and also explores and inherits the ecological wisdom included as well as promotes the urban public art construction on the basis of digging and protecting traditional architecture, folk culture and historic site. The public art constantly interprets and digs the profound cultural connotation, making the people to construct the contemporary urban comprehensive cultural landscape and city image in addition to their conjunction with the nature. The ecological public art can provide a spiritual space of highlighting public will, maintaining metropolis emotions, integrating multi-culture, and creating harmonious atmosphere through dialoguing with the entire environment, history, context of a city so as to make it an important part of the cultural life and emotional memory of the human.

---

### **CONCLUSION**

---

In conclusion, the principles of ecological aesthetics can exert useful applications on the creation, form selection

and other levels of contemporary public art, bringing in some new aesthetic experiences to the creation and study of contemporary public art, and rendering sociological meaning in implementation and argument. The public art works that are designed by referring to the basic principles of ecological aesthetics should embody the in-deep thoughts of harmony between man and nature in connotation, and get close to the nature, fit in the environment, and adjust their distance away from life in form. Such public art works are not simply academic practical exploration but capable of playing concrete positive role in terms of highlighting regional cultural characteristics and constructing urban cultural landscape image. Similarly, excellent public art practices can richen the research contents of ecological aesthetics, and offer more cases and materials for future academic research and discussion. For this reason, the fusion and interaction in-between the ecological aesthetics principles and the public art creation of natural environment should possess the significance of reference that cannot be ignored either for the construction of current urbanization or for the problems on sustainable development confronted by all humanity.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Chuang Tzu • On the Equality of Things* (Extensive Interpretation of Chuang Tzu - Heaven and Earth)
- Grout, C. (2005, January). *Pour de l'art dans Notre quotidien* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). (des oeuvres en milieu urbain). In M. Y. Yao (Trans.). Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press.
- Haeckel, E. (2000). German naturalist. In Y. Ch. Song (Ed.), *Urban ecology* (p.3). Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.
- Lynch, K. A. (1960). *The image of the city* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.) In Y. P. Fang, & X. J. He (Trans., 2001, April). Huaxia Publishing House.
- Nairobi Declaration*. (1982, May 10-18). Special conference on human environment held by the World Community of States, Nairobi.
- Odum, E. P. (1953). *Fundamentals of ecology*. Boston: Cengage Learning.
- Rio declaration on environment and development*. (1992, June). The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- Tansley, A. G. (1947). The early history of modern plant ecology in Britain. *Journal of Ecology*, 35, 130-137
- The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). (1987). *Our common future*.