

INTERVIEW WITH YRJÖ SEPÄNMAA

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Finnish environmental aesthetician Yrjö Sepänmaa is one of the first Nordic scholars to engage with environmental aesthetics, and, to my knowledge, the first person in the world to hold the title “Professor of Environmental Aesthetics.” Since I started to work within this field around 2007, I have observed how active the field of environmental aesthetics is in Finland, with many scholars contributing to topics such as nature, urban, and everyday aesthetics, and numerous conferences being held there on these subjects. Around this time, I also learned about the conference series organized by Sepänmaa, which placed great emphasis on bridging theory and practice—an approach similarly taken by the International Institute for Applied Aesthetics, which is based in Finland.

I first met Sepänmaa when I attended the Annual Conference of the Nordic Society for Aesthetics in Finland in 2010, with the theme “Environment, Aesthetics, and the Arts.” Since then, I have been curious to learn more about his work and his contributions to the field. In March 2025, I seized the opportunity to meet him during a visit to Helsinki and arranged an interview. I was fortunate to have the assistance of Max Rynnänen, who kindly invited us to his home for dinner and provided the space for the following conversation:

G: Thank you Yrjö, for accepting to do this interview with me. One of the reasons why I wanted to interview you for the special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* following the 2024 annual meeting in Iceland is to encourage more engagement with the field of environmental aesthetics in the Nordic context. Since you have been engaged with this field for such a long time I’m curious to hear your perspective on how this field has developed, especially in the Finnish and Nordic context. The first thing that I want to ask you is how you came to study environmental aesthetics?

Y: Actually it was in the 60’s. I came to Helsinki University as a student in the autumn of 1965, and I began my studies in aesthetics and comparative literature. The background for this decision was that at school, I got recognition that I’m a good writer and

that's why I began to study the Finnish language and literature. At the time the normal career for those who combined literature and the Finnish language was to become a high school teacher, it was considered to be such a sure career. The language studies were a disappointment for me but I became enthusiastic about literature and especially about aesthetics, although there was hardly anything taught about aesthetics at that time, so the studies consisted mostly of literature. So the background for my interest in environmental aesthetics were these literary studies, but also the fact that I began writing reviews of fiction for the second largest newspaper in Finland, *Uusi Suomi*. During that time I discovered nature writing and in some way I saw a parallel between writing as a literary critic of fiction and nature writing, and this sprang from my interest in meta-criticism at that time. I was inspired by Harold Osborne, who founded the *British Journal of Aesthetics* in 1960, he very clearly said that aesthetics is meta-criticism; it discusses how we speak of arts, but not directly the arts themselves. And so I became interested in how nature writers describe, interpret and evaluate nature and more broadly any environment, and I saw this similarity with how literary and art critics describe works, interpret and evaluate them. I was astonished that aesthetics was in practice only concentrated on art criticism and that no one spoke of this parallel, how similar nature writing and what could be called nature criticism is to art criticism. And I found that this wasn't confined only to nature writing, but also to writing about all everyday objects and environments. Nowadays we speak of aesthetics of the everyday, but this was already something I was thinking of at the end of the 60's. I was inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's lectures on aesthetics that he gave in 1938, and were published in 1966 in a small book. In these lectures I think he gives the basis for everyday aesthetics in the way he speaks of how we go to the store and discuss for instance furniture or clothes, and in such situations we can observe how people discuss the aesthetics of these objects. So for me the scope of aesthetics was much broader than being confined only to the arts, aesthetics concerns all environments and our ordinary life. This is why aesthetics is much more important and more widely practiced than we often realize. I use such words as hidden aestheticians; the people who don't know that they speak of or analyze aesthetic questions. For instance, I analyzed Finnish nature writer Reino Kalliola (1909-1982) who was around seventy five years old at that time, and he repeatedly said that he didn't understand why I was interested in his writings,

and I had to explain to him that his writings were aesthetic writings, he was doing writing about nature in a similar way that art critics write about art.

Another background for my interest in environmental aesthetics was also Arthur Danto's article "Artworks and real things" (1973)¹ and George Dickie's institutional theory of art. Again, I saw this parallel between art and environment. In his book *Art and the Aesthetic* (1974)², Dickie developed his institutional theory of art, but he left it open, if this may be applied to the environment, too. This institution he spoke of does not only involve works or objects, but also the professionals; artists and crafts people who produce the art objects, and then there are different museums, libraries, and there is research and the people who work there. This same institutional structure applies in the context of environment as in the arts. Of course, there are also such art forms as architecture that belong to both art and environment. From the beginning it was clear to me that aesthetics is a very broad area of research, and that it's not only what academic people do in universities but also what is done in everyday life. These hidden aestheticians are everywhere, although they don't speak of aesthetics as they don't even know this term. They have a different terminology which they use, but basically there is this parallel. I also started thinking about the purpose of aesthetics and aesthetic studies in this context—since there are these people outside of the university, these hidden aestheticians, our purpose as professional aestheticians must be also to teach and have contact with those that are working on aesthetic issues outside of the academic world. This also came from the acknowledgment that our students of aesthetics will have to find work in different professions and then the question is how can they use this knowledge and skills which they have got in the university? We cannot only be interested in continuing this academic tradition and doing purely theoretical work, we must also adjust our work so that it connects meaningfully with this practice and life outside academia. This is why I began speaking of the theory and practice of applied aesthetics.

G: As you said, your interest in the parallel between the aesthetics of art and nature was already sparked in the 60's, which is at the same time as Ronald Hepburn wrote his well known paper from 1966 that is often said to have laid the ground for this field, "Contemporary aesthetics and the neglect of natural beauty."

Were you aware of his work and were there others around you that were making these connections?

Y: When preparing my contribution for our environmental aesthetics lecture series at the University of Helsinki in 1975, I found Hepburn's manifesto-like article which confirmed my view of the importance of studying natural and everyday beauty. I later got to know him, and I remember that he was very enthusiastic when we invited him to the first conference on environmental aesthetics titled *Meeting in the Landscape* at Koli, June 1994.

G: It's interesting that it seems that at a similar time you are pointing to the same problem; that aesthetics has been too narrowly confined to art and art criticism, and that there are so many other things that we appreciate aesthetically that we need to discuss within aesthetics. How did you continue from this realization that there is this parallel between art and nature, how did your work develop from there?

Y: I got my PhD quite late, in 1986. But I had quite many articles published before. In 1971 we organized a *Studia Aesthetica* lecture series in Helsinki University and then we published a book titled *The Aesthetic Field* (1972, in Finnish)³ based on that series. In this book I have an article with a title that translates as "Two research traditions in aesthetics." For me these two traditions were the philosophy of art and the philosophy of beauty, and environmental aesthetics grows out of this philosophy of beauty, since beauty is everywhere, not only in the arts. Later I found George Dickie's book *Aesthetics: An Introduction*⁴ from 1971, where he spoke of three traditions, the third one being the philosophy of criticism, but the first two like in my case, the philosophy of art and the philosophy of beauty. I found it surprising how we seem to have developed similar ideas without being aware of each other. Arnold Berleant began his work at a similar time. His first book was *The Aesthetic Field* from 1970. Allen Carlson was also starting his work on environmental aesthetics, a bit later, I think. And then it was Hepburn's article from 1966. So the 60's were some kind of turning point. When I spoke of aesthetics as meta-criticism, one important book for me was *Aesthetics and Language* edited by William Elton that was published already in 1954. I started off my thinking in aesthetics with this meta-criticism idea, that I applied to writings about nature as well as art, but then I more and more was drawn to aesthetics

and questions of how aesthetics can be useful; where do we need aesthetics and what is the relation between aesthetics and ethics? What are the ethical limits for the arts and for environment? Here I see a big difference. When we are dealing with the arts and other fictional works, or simply with our imagination, there are practically no limits of what is possible in imagination. In the arts maybe there are some limits but not many. But when we think of environment, what we do with our real environment, there are many limits. In that case we have to take into consideration other values, especially ethical values, but of course also economic values, for instance when we think of architecture, the economic limits are very important.

G: Is it possible that there was something happening in this period of history that sparked this growing interest in different corners of the world? Perhaps the rapid transition from natural to urban environments –cities expanding, natural areas increasingly threatened by human activities. Could this have prompted the idea, shared by so many of you at the time, that aesthetics is something essential, not just in the context of art criticism and artistic reflection, but more broadly? Was there a sense of urgency to consider these issues at that moment?

Y: Yes, I have tried to think about this, because when we see how people developed very similar ideas without knowing of each other, it seems logical to try to find out what is the reason; what it is in the society or in the culture that is the reason for this, but I have found no answer.

G: Yes, we can only speculate. I sometimes wonder whether there is again a rising need for emphasising environmental aesthetics today as we realize more and more how important the experience of nature is to us as it becomes more and more threatened by human activity. In that context I have to mention how inspired I was by something that I read in an article of yours where you said that to be able to understand and conserve natural beauty, we need to be able to talk about it. I was inspired by this because I observed that at the time I was starting to study environmental aesthetics, around 2007, no one was really speaking about natural beauty as a serious value in Iceland, even though it was a very important factor in all sorts of decisions that were being made around environmental issues at that time. Natural beauty was being expressed and shown by Icelandic artists and

photographers but these expressions did not have a place at the decision-making table. Since this time, I have tried through the language of aesthetics to provide ways to speak of this beauty as a value to be taken seriously in decision-making.

Y: Yes, this is why nature writing is important, and not only writing, but also photography and films. We see that nowadays especially these nature films that give an insight into nature and animal life are very popular. This gives us more understanding of the life of animals that are all around us, but we never see them. Writing then maybe can give us deeper explanations and this develops our sensitivity for these phenomena which is very important.

G: When I began my PhD in environmental aesthetics, I started looking for conferences that had environmental aesthetics as a theme and found that many of the conferences on this topic were being held in Finland. It seemed to me that this is a particularly active field in Finland, much more so than in many other countries. I'm curious to hear your thoughts on how this came about. And as you now mention the importance of nature writing and nature films and you previously noted that you focused on nature writing when you were working as a literary critic, I wonder whether there is a strong tradition for nature writing in Finland and whether this has contributed to this fertile soil for the field of environmental aesthetics?

Y: I actually did my first research on Reino Kalliola, who was the first official nature conservation supervisor in Finland. He also wrote quite many books and articles and gave public lectures about nature in Finland so his influence was enormous. I don't know if there are more nature writers here than elsewhere, but some of them are in such positions in our culture that they are quite influential. So that is maybe one background for Finnish environmental aesthetics. Some might also refer to the Finnish love of nature, for instance, in our culture, people have their summer cottages in natural areas, even though they live here in the cities. During summer holidays and weekends, they go to their summer home. In earlier times these summer cottages were in quite primitive conditions, but now they are more and more like second homes. But there is nature around and people pick berries and fish and spend time in the forest, and this love of nature is a very important part of Finnish culture, so yes, I think that's one background to Finnish environmental aesthetics.

G: Maybe your work also played a role in developing this field in the Finnish academic world, that has resulted in so many people being engaged in environmental aesthetics here?

Y: Yes, that's true, although it's a bit difficult for me to say. I was involved in so many things in Finnish aesthetics, almost anything that was done in this field for a long time. I was involved with founding our Finnish Society of Aesthetics in 1972, and in organizing the first lecture series that I mentioned before in 1971 and the book that followed. And after that we organized lecture series with other themes and other resulting books. In 1975 we organized a lecture series with the theme environmental aesthetics. The book that was based on that series came out a bit later, in 1981, with the same title: *Environmental Aesthetics*. And again there was quite a funny parallel of the development of thought on this here and in other countries. In 1982 I had a grant from the Canadian government to do research at the University of Alberta in Edmonton where Allen Carlson was a professor who was also writing on environmental aesthetics. That was actually the reason why I applied for the grant to go to Edmonton. And when I told him that we arranged this lecture series on environmental aesthetics in Helsinki University in 1975, he told me that they arranged a lecture series with the same theme in 1978, three years later. I gave him our book on environmental aesthetics, that was published in 1981 and then he told me that they would publish their book based on the lecture series that same year, in 1982. So we had our lecture series three years earlier and the book one year earlier, so it was basically the same idea occurring in Finland and in Canada at the same time. Both books were inter-disciplinary, not just including articles by philosophical aestheticians, but contributions by e.g. architects, geographers, literary scholars and cultural historians too. Even the book titles were the same, *Environmental Aesthetics* (*Ympäristöestetiikka* in Finnish)⁵, the Canadian book with the subtitle *Essays in Interpretation*.⁶ Including people from other branches was based on what I mentioned earlier, that for me aesthetics must go beyond their own limits. Not only by going outside academia, but also by going outside its limits inside academia, we need interdisciplinary studies in aesthetics.

G: This rings true to me, since there are so many aspects to the aesthetic values we find in environment, we find aesthetic value in the history of a place, we find aesthetic value in the living beings,

and in the cultural aspects of natural environments. So there are so many other fields of study that can shed light on the aesthetic values we find in environments.

Y: Yes, and this relates to one of the topics I discussed with Allen Carlson when I was in Canada, that as aestheticians we need knowledge from other fields. He was interested in the question of whether our appreciation of environment must be science based? How much do we have to know from other sciences and are there situations when we make aesthetic mistakes because of lack of knowledge? When we for instance say something is beautiful, like a spectacular sunset that has many colors because the air is polluted, is it then our mistake to say that it's beautiful or do we have to change our evaluation when we are told the reason why the colors are so spectacular? Allen Carlson famously wrote that aesthetic evaluation must be science based and that became a big discussion in environmental aesthetics, whether this is true or not. I spoke with my wife who is a folklorist about all these different stories we have of nature, for example folk stories about how these big stones that the ice has moved explain how these stones were thrown by giants. So for me, it's also cultural knowledge, the knowledge of mythologies and such things, not only the knowledge of science that matters. So there is such knowledge which is scientifically not true, but it's true in the sense that folk have given this kind of funny explanation to natural phenomena.

G: Another question that comes to my mind in relation to these lecture series and the resulting books that you published, were they meant for the academic community or did they also go more widely into the society?

Y: All the speakers were academic people who had this scholarly or scientific knowledge of their own field. But because the series was a *studia generalia* series, which means that it's meant basically for anyone. These scholars were asked to take into consideration that the audience is quite diverse, and that they should speak in a way that is understandable not only for scholars in their own field, but more broadly. The purpose was to go beyond this academic circle and have contact with a broader audience. Of course it requires basic education, you cannot reach everyone, that's clear. I think we succeeded because there were two editions of the book on environmental aesthetics, so the first edition got

sold out and then we got a second edition two years later. I don't know exactly how many copies of it were sold, but anyway it sold quite well. There was a lot of interest, also in the lecture series, I think there were about 100 people every time so it was quite popular.

My interest in applied aesthetics and this broader conversation between disciplines and different audiences later led to us hosting the thirteenth World Congress of Aesthetics in 1995 here in Finland, in Lahti. I was the chair of the Finnish Society of Aesthetics at that time and I was also the president of this world congress. I got this idea as a main theme of the congress; aesthetics in practice. There was quite a long preparation. When I was in Canada in the University of Alberta I met Roger Shiner who was involved with this international organization and I asked him about the possibility of arranging the conference in Finland. Then Arnold Berleant later became the president of the International Association of Aesthetics and he was quite enthusiastic about the theme of aesthetics in practice. Another part of the preparation for this world congress was founding the International Institute of Applied Aesthetics in 1993, which took quite a few years to get done. The city of Lahti had a design institute and an art institute and they were very interested to get academic support and university support for their students and for their teachers. This is why we worked with them on planning this institute, and we succeeded to get the city of Lahti to support it at the beginning. Later there were many difficulties with economy so we combined these two projects of founding the institute and organizing the world congress. Our idea was that the world congress would give publicity to this new institute. The aim was also to get Finnish aesthetics more internationally known so the institute published an anthology of Finnish aesthetics, *Art and Beyond: Finnish Approaches to Aesthetics* (1995),⁷ that was given to every congress participant. In this way we could both promote this new institute and Finnish aesthetics. In this way we really tried to promote this idea of applied aesthetics, and the everyday aesthetics that belongs to that.

Later when I was a professor at the University of Joensuu/ University of Eastern Finland (1994-2013) I organized a series of conferences with themes such as forests, bogs, water, agricultural land, stone, the sky. It became a series of seven international conferences and seven books were published, based on the

conference papers. The first conference was held in 1994, the same year I began my work at the University of Joensuu and the last conference was held in 2009. So in those 15 years we had seven conferences and seven books published, and many of the central local and international aestheticians and environmental philosophers participated, like for instance Arnold Berleant, Chen Wangheng, Marcia Muelder Eaton, Maria Golaszewska, Eugene C. Hargrove, Ronald Hepburn, Mara Miller, Yuriko Saito, Holmes Rolston III and Barbara Sandrisser.

G: Was this then also a part of creating this interest in environmental aesthetics here in Finland, hosting the World congress and founding the Institute for applied aesthetics here, as well as this series of conferences that were focused on different elements of the Finnish landscape?

Y: Yes, these are elements of Finnish landscape, but of course they are found everywhere. The first conference had the theme “meeting with the landscape” and gave a general view of environmental aesthetics. After that there were different land forms that became the theme. The second conference was on the forest, then we had the theme of bogs and peatland, then water, then agricultural land, then stone and the last one was heaven, where all the different meanings of heaven, including the religious element were addressed—actually it was held in the Valamo Monastery. And again, there was this idea that we include specialists not only from universities, but also people from for instance business life, law and education and such. So the speakers were professionals from different fields, and the audience was also quite mixed. We had between 100 and 200 people participating in every conference, each one of them spanning three days.

G: And do you think that having this broad mix of people coming together to discuss the value of these different landscapes and elements had an influence? Did these conferences and the books that came out raise more awareness of the value of these kinds of landscapes, and did they influence environmental practice here in Finland?

Y: It's difficult of course to know how successful it was, but I have heard quite many times that people got contacts, and then they continued cooperation afterwards. In that way there was influence,

we organized these conferences but what happened after that was up to the participants, what they did with it. The books were especially important because they saved the main ideas that came out of the discussion. They were published in Finnish only, but I know that quite many of the foreign participants published their papers in professional aesthetic journals or landscape journals, such as *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. In that way the conferences also gained visibility abroad. We had all these central people in environmental aesthetics participating, not every time, but some people participated quite frequently, such as Arnold Berleant. Quite often they also combined their visit in Finland with a visit to The University of Helsinki, the University of Jyväskylä or the University of Joensuu where they gave lectures. I heard that some of those international participants knew each other only through their writings, but they had never met personally. This conference in Finland therefore provided an opportunity for them to meet for the first time. For instance, I think no one from America had met Ronald Hepburn, but they met him here.

G: So Finland was kind of a hub for environmental aesthetics at this time?

Y: Yes, it worked out in that way.

G: How have you seen it develop since this time? are you aware of similar developments in the other Nordic countries? Were people from there attending these events or do you think Finland stood out in the Nordic context with this emphasis on environmental aesthetics? I'm also wondering how you have seen environmental aesthetics as a field develop since these conferences were held, especially in the Nordic context?

Y: The International Institute of Applied Aesthetics in Lahti arranges its summer seminars regularly and that is one place where scholars especially from the Nordic countries meet each other, but they also have guest lecturers from other countries. Then there is the Nordic Society for Aesthetics conferences that develop contacts and cooperation between scholars from Nordic countries. But in a way its a funny thing that the Finnish Society for Aesthetics was the first national society of aesthetics in the Nordic countries. The Nordic Society for Aesthetics was founded in 1983, much later than the Finnish Society for Aesthetics.

G: So there seems to have been more emphasis on aesthetics, and environmental aesthetics especially, here in Finland.

Y: Yes, but I must say that environmental aesthetics is not the only focus. Aesthetics of the Everyday is very popular in the Nordic countries, but also abroad, where Thomas Leddy and Yuriko Saito have made a great contribution. A couple of years ago she published a book on the *Aesthetics of Care* and that's a new topic, which is connected to everyday aesthetics, but is also a new opening to a very important area. She also wrote a book on the aesthetics of the familiar and so Yuriko Saito is a very important scholar. She also participated in these conferences I organized and has given lectures in Helsinki, Jyväskylä and Joensuu. So what is important is that aestheticians from abroad know Finland and Finnish scholars, they come to Finnish universities and Finnish scholars go abroad and have their own connections. Nothing like this was happening in the 60's when I began, nothing. It's growing all the time.

G: Do you still see environmental aesthetics developing and growing?

Y: There are more and more dissertations published and there are very active scholars such as Arto Haapala who is professor of aesthetics in the University of Helsinki, Pauline von Bonsdorff in the University of Jyväskylä, and Sanna Lehtinen, Max Ryyänen and Ossi Naukkarinen in Aalto University. A new direction for me and other scholars was also gaining connections with Asian countries like China, South Korea and Japan. For me, it began in 1994 when we had the first conference on environmental aesthetics and we had professor Kim Moon Hwan from Seoul University in South Korea participating. I didn't know of him and I don't know how he got information about this conference, but he sent a proposal for a paper and we invited him. And then a bit later I received an email from him where he said that they now have translated my book, *The Beauty of Environment: A General Model for Environmental Aesthetics*,⁸ into Korean and asked if I would accept to publish it. So they did the translation and after that asked, and of course it was fine for me. It was 2001 that my book came out there. This was the book that was based on my dissertation from 1986, which was first published in English. When I had a Fulbright grant to go to the University of Georgia and the University of North Texas, Gene Hargrove had a small

publishing house and he asked if he could publish a new edition of this book. And then again, Chen Wangheng from the University of Wuhan asked if they can translate it into Chinese and so it was published in Chinese in 2005. So there are four editions. In Finland first, then in the United States and then in South Korea and China. Arnold Berleant said that for him, this was the first systematic book in environmental aesthetics. My latest book, *The Future of Environmental Aesthetics and Environmental Aesthetic Civility*,⁹ came out in Finnish in 2023, and actually there are many answers to your questions in this book.

G: That's great, hopefully it will be translated into more languages, so that more people can become inspired by your thought.

Y: First it was published by the Finnish Society for Aesthetics as a digital version and then the same text was published as a printed book. The picture on the cover by artist Anna Estarriola presents the idea that what we need is a dialogue between different species to be able to take more into account other animals, plants and environments. The video work from where this picture is taken, *The System*,¹⁰ presents the difficulties of how we can get into contact. We may get together and have a panel like in the academic world, we have people and an elephant, a fish and a bird, and all of them speak their own language. And then there is an interpreter who desperately tries to translate the dialogue to English, but gets into confusions. So that's what we need in environmental matters; more understanding between different species to be able to take into account their living conditions. This presents for me basically the same situation as with dialogue between academics and scholars from different branches, and also with dialogue between academics and people who are outside the academia. We need understanding and common language, so we have to overcome the restrictions of our languages.

G: This brings me to another theme that I wanted to discuss with you, the theme of aesthetic welfare, aesthetic well-being and aesthetic education which you have written about. What led you to embrace and emphasize these themes?

Y: One text that interested me was a paper by Monroe Beardsley that he gave at the 6th International Congress of Aesthetics that was held in Uppsala in Sweden in 1968, called "Aesthetic Welfare." I

wasn't at that congress, but the paper was published in the conference proceedings, and also in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, I think it was 1970.¹¹ I didn't know the paper at that time, but learned of it later and found it very impressive. He wrote about the difficulties we have when we try to balance different values and how as aestheticians we cannot focus only on aesthetic values. If we do, it becomes mere aestheticism. In real life we will run into difficulties if we don't take into account ethical values, economic values and health-related ones. As aestheticians we have to accept that there are various values and that they may conflict. Our task is to find out a kind of symbiosis between them.

Again, if we think of arts and imagination and what happens in our head, there is almost total freedom. But when we live in society, we have to consider other people, the environment and other species, animals, plants, etc. Monroe Beardsley briefly touches on these kinds of issues, and later I have tried to develop an idea of 'a total work of environment', based on Wagner's idea of 'a total work of art'. Aesthetic well-being, then, refers to this concept of a total work of environment, where we strive to find symbiosis. We can think about aesthetics on two levels: The first level is that we have aesthetic values, as a part of a set of ethical values, economic values and so on. The second level is aesthetics as the combination of these values where we find this harmony between them.

Perhaps we can say that this is the deep level of aesthetics, that aesthetics has both a shallow level and a deep level. The shallow level is when aesthetics is just one value among many, while the deep level is when we achieve harmony and balance with other values. I believe that the ultimate goal of aesthetics is this deeper level, or harmony. It's not enough to focus on aesthetics at the shallow level. Too often, aestheticians focus solely on protecting their own field and determining what is best for it, but we must look beyond that. As aestheticians, we should aim for a good life for ourselves and for others.

G: Is this the level in which we need to work on so that our aesthetics becomes applied and used in practice? Which doesn't happen if we stay on a level where we are just doing aesthetics on the shallow level, and not relating to the bigger picture?

Y: Yes I think that applied aesthetics is about finding these working relations. We need to accept that people and societies have different goals and different principles and what is good for me may be bad for others. We must have this broader attitude. Yuriko Saito's book on aesthetics of care is very important in this context, she develops this account of aesthetics that especially takes ethical values into consideration. In this sense, Aesthetic wellbeing is some kind of combination, particularly with ethical values.

G: Do you see this as a responsibility that we have, as people working in aesthetics, to work in this way that we are trying to find harmony with other values and working with people who are aestheticians in practice or hidden aestheticians? From what we have discussed it seems like you have seen it as a responsibility for you as an aesthetician to work in this way, and I must say that I really appreciate how you have been a role model in this regard at least for me and hopefully for many others, encouraging us to do applied aesthetics and to bring our work into practical contexts that can truly influence decisions impacting people's lives. This is incredibly important, as aesthetics play such a significant role in our life.

Y: Yes, I also think that when someone asks what aesthetics is, what we are doing, if we keep this kind of picture of our profession, then it gets more understanding as an academic branch. I remember that in the 60's, aesthetics was not taken seriously. But I believe there has been an enormous shift in our culture and that nowadays aesthetics is taken seriously. Aesthetics is in a completely different place than in the 60's. At that time it was mainly associated with beauty; beauty in a very narrow sense, some kind of a beauty on the surface, and it was related to these beauty salons, aesthetic clinics and what you can do with your face to make you more beautiful and such. Even nowadays this connection exists, and of course this is also a part of aesthetics and there are professions which do this kind of beauty work, but this is a very narrow area. For instance, if you search the internet and write the International Association of Aesthetics, you find these associations as well. If people associated aesthetics with anything in the 60's, it was with that kind of beauty. And then they would ask: why do you study it in the university?

G: This brings me to another question, how do you understand beauty? What is beauty in your mind?

Y: I published a small book on beauty titled *The Concept of Beauty & Environment as a Total Work of Art* (1991, in Finnish).¹² And also in my earlier book that came out in 1986, beauty was central, as the title suggests: *The Beauty of Environment*.

G: I very much appreciate that you have emphasized this concept. For me, beauty has sometimes been missing as a concept from aesthetics, I think we are not spending enough time discussing the concept of beauty. Of course, aesthetic experiences are so various and they are not all aesthetic experiences of beauty, but still beauty for me is such a core of aesthetics.

Y: We have the whole scale from beauty to ugliness and in between there is some kind of difference, which is nothing neutral. The ugly side is also very impressive. It's quite interesting that Arnold Berleant has in his later writings for example in his new book *The Social Aesthetics of Human Environments* (2023)¹³ discussed ugliness and terrorism and such questions, acknowledging that they belong to aesthetics and that when we speak of beauty we cannot speak of it without its opposite, ugliness. Just as beauty influences us, so too does ugliness; we have very strong reactions to ugliness, as strong as we do to beauty. But then there are these ethical limits, so that in our head we can somehow play with ugliness, as well as in the arts, but what about our real environment, for instance? There was a scholar called Karl Rosenkranz in Germany, who had a book written in 1853 on the aesthetics of ugliness, and ugliness is discussed in aesthetics quite a lot. So both beauty and ugliness are discussed.

G: But have we discussed enough how we understand beauty? Do we understand it as form and color, or is it something more? For me, beauty is the core of being human—our inclination to appreciate beauty, be drawn by beauty and wanting to experience it. But we don't talk about that so much in aesthetics, do we?

Y: I have not avoided to use the term beauty, as I said I have a small book on the concept of beauty and I have also given a lecture series of beauty. So I have an impression that quite many aestheticians nowadays, tried to avoid the term but I think it's a useful term. There are quite different ways to understand it. But aesthetics is difficult in the sense that even when someone asks us what is aesthetics, we start disagreeing already, it's like in any philosophy, almost all things are problematic.

G: Yes, the concept of landscape has also been understood in different ways.

Y: That's true also. I'm just writing an article on landscape for the Finnish Kalevala society's year book that has the theme of landscape next year. As I mentioned before, the conference series in Joensuu began with the concept of landscape as a theme and the first book was titled *Face to Face with the Landscape*.¹⁴ We held the conference at Koli Mountain in North Karelia, a very famous place with a very fine lake view from the top of the mountain. During the conference we all went there and as tourists do, we looked at the lake landscape and I used the phrase that we look at the landscape and the landscape looks at us so that that we have this kind of a special relationship with environment through aesthetic perception. We don't only have that kind of face to face relationship with other people; we can be face to face with the dog, and also with plants and landscapes in a metaphorical sense. Nature writers often use such phrases as "the landscape speaks to us" - it's a very common phrase. The landscape speaks and we have to listen to the landscape.

G: But we use the word landscape when we are experiencing something like this, we don't say "the environment looks me in the face or speaks to me." The landscape concept seems to include this relationality?

Y: In some way environment sounds too scientific, but landscape is a more poetic term, softer in some way. And I must say that when I wrote my book *The Beauty of the environment...* and when we had the first conference, one of the issues was whether I should speak of the aesthetics of landscape or aesthetics of environment, and I chose environment. In my new book, I discuss how in the 60's we had a situation where there was kind of a year zero in aesthetics, a new beginning. The new beginning was this meta-criticism and aesthetics of language. For me the ideas of meta-criticism also became some kind of year zero. Now I understand more and since then my ideas have changed. When I look now at the aesthetics of landscape, I see that it has a pretty long history as a literary and poetic term, but in the 60's the science question was at the center, and I think that was a factor in the choice of the term environment over landscape.

G: Yes, and today, the landscape concept is a term that is used in geography and many other disciplines that are working with practice. The European landscape convention that was founded in 2000 is also used very much in the practice context, so I think it's an important concept to work with in relation to applying aesthetics more in practice.

Y: Yes, nowadays, the landscape term is used in these contexts, for instance in Finland we have so-called national landscapes that are officially listed. Koli mountain is one of those national landscapes that are I think 27 all in all. The European landscape convention also emphasizes traditional and cultural landscapes, so the landscape term is coming back. I'm not sure if this was the right choice in the 60's, to choose environment over landscape as a key term.

G: I'm sure the choice was right in the context of that time, when perhaps the understanding of the landscape concept was often more associated with a more narrow visual understanding of appreciating nature aesthetically. Our role is perhaps to not get trapped in concepts, but develop them further and choose the ones that are most suitable to the situations and goals we are working with each time. Well, I think we have covered a lot this evening and it's time to stop, although there are so many other topics that would be interesting to discuss. Thank you so much for giving your time and energy to engage in this conversation and share your thoughts and experiences.

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