THE ROLE OF CARE IN ENVIROMENTAL AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

We manage everyday life with the help of artifacts, a major part of our environment. Although we are the ones who create and operate artifacts, their service for us can be characterized as their care for us, indicated by our frequent attribution of morally-charged aesthetic qualities to them. Their care for us suggests our reciprocal responsibility for caring for them not only by careful handling to avoid their breakage and destruction but also by a more proactive work of care and maintenance, such as cleaning. Considered 'reproductive labor,' care and maintenance work does not garner the recognition or appreciation accorded to 'productive labor' which requires creativity and imagination. However, care and maintenance work has surprisingly rich aesthetic potentials, as well as an existential significance for encouraging our engagement with the world. We lose something important if we are completely liberated from such work, the direction promoted by technological advancement.

KEYWORDS

Care, Artifacts, Reproductive labor, Cleaning

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by imagining a good society in which to live. Most of us would want the protection of various rights, equity and inclusivity, political participation, economic security, education, meaningful work, access to medical care, and a healthy living environment. However, no matter how well a societal structure protects and promotes our well-being and how well everyone carries out duties toward each other, the quality of life can remain rather poor *if* we remain solitary individuals without any caring social relationships. Such a society is certainly preferable to the Hobbesian state of nature, but our lives there would not be satisfying or fulfilling. In fact, as recently as in 2023, the then US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy issued a report that loneliness and isolation are an epidemic today.[1]

The notion of care in popular discourse is often associated with medical care which garnered intensified attention during the pandemic. Though less dramatically, care conjures up the image of vulnerable populations cared for in various facilities, such as child-care centers, hospitals, and nursing homes. Thus, care tends to suggest one-directional acts by caregivers dispensing care to those in need. However, this common perception unduly limits the scope of care and, worse, can be mistaken for paternalistic patronizing.
I consider care to be a much wider ethical practice to mutually protect the well-being and promote flourishing of all concerned, motivated by empathetic concerns. Care in this sense presupposes a humble and grateful acknowledgement that all of us are supported by a web of relationships with other humans, nature, or artifacts, which together make up our environment. At the same time, we are both empowered ***and*** responsible for creating an environment in which we collaboratively support each other through care.

Environmental aesthetics, referred to in the title of this article, is commonly associated with nature. However, the environment of our lifeworld consists of our relationships not only with nature but also with artifacts and other human beings. In this article, I will explore the role aesthetics plays in our care relationship with the artifactual world. For this purpose, the conventional Western model of aesthetics is not helpful, insofar as it focuses on a disinterested spectator appreciating an object and making a judgement on its aesthetic value. Friedrich Nietzsche's observation is apropos here. According to him, Western aesthetics "formulated the experiences of what is beautiful, from the point of view of the *receivers* in art" and takes

Kant as representative of this stance that "considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the 'spectator'" who considers himself as someone "placed before the great visual and acoustic spectacle that is life."[2] Although Nietzsche leads this observation as a preparation for his very specific vision of an Übermensch as the artistic creator of his life, he is correct in pointing out that the aesthetics from the perspective of the creator, whether regarding art or aesthetic experience, has been largely neglected.

The major problem with neglecting the creator-oriented perspective is that it excludes the first-person account of *doing* things, whether making things, performing house chores, or cooking. Here I share John Dewey's frustration that English lacks a term that "unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words 'artistic' and 'esthetic,'" the former referring to "the producer's standpoint" and the latter to "the consumer's" experience that is "appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying."[3] This separation creates a false division of labor within our aesthetic life, when we in fact play both roles, often simultaneously. The spectator-driven and judgment-oriented perspective has tended to de-emphasize the production aspect of our aesthetic lives, which is essential for a full account of the aesthetics of our care relationship with artifacts.

ARTIFACTS' CARE FOR US: EXAMPLES

First, let me explore the aesthetics of the artifacts' care for us. Here the traditional aesthetic categories such as beauty and sublimity are rarely applicable. Instead, in addition to qualities such as cute, quaint, drab, and dated, we often invoke morally-charged qualities: considerate, thoughtful, humane, humble, generous, and kind, or the opposite: indifferent, thoughtless, inconsiderate, arrogant, mean, and hostile.

Japanese culture provides rich examples for these morally-charged aesthetic characterizations of things, although of course such examples are not limited to this particular cultural tradition and society. Consider first the stepping stones in a typical Japanese garden.[4] They are laid to mark a pathway and help the visitors avoid muddy ground. However, they also give a sense of firmness and security visually by keeping an even space between rocks and avoiding a break between rocks running for a long stretch. Some other times, their arrangement is rather awkward for an easy stride, thereby encouraging the visitor to focus on each rock's characteristics. Furthermore, pathways are often meandering, providing

multiple viewpoints for the surroundings and enticing the visitors to follow along. Thus, these stepping stones care for the visitors by providing a safe and aesthetically rich experience.

What is underfoot with its aesthetic potentials hidden in plain sight is often neglected in our experience of the world normally gained from an erect posture with the visual field in front of us.[5] A subway station near a zoo in my hometown in Japan features the figures of various animals on its corridor floor, providing an exciting anticipation for children. The passengers at Seattle-Tacoma Airport in the United States are treated to a fun experience of tracking the whimsical images of travelling salmon, the fish associated with the locale, sometimes carrying a suitcase and other times morphing into an airplane. Similarly, one corridor at Boston Logan Airport features various sea creatures on its floor, reminding the passengers of the popular aquarium nearby. One of the fun experiences of visiting different cities for me has become finding various figures on the utility hole covers. This quintessentially utilitarian object from our everyday surroundings offers not only an aesthetic enjoyment but also an enhanced sense of place by featuring well-known landscapes and objects associated with the place, such as cherry blossoms in Tokyo, a castle in Osaka, the profile of Chief Seattle in Seattle, and a rose in Portland, Oregon, USA. The appeal of these decorative figures underfoot goes beyond straightforward sensory pleasure by integrating a sense of pride in the city and welcoming greetings to the visitors, in short, an expression of care for the city, residents, and visitors.

In contrast, the train station in Providence, Rhode Island, my current hometown, is a disgrace. Its platform with bare concrete structure has few signs indicating where it is or which way is Boston or New York, let alone any welcoming greetings for the visitors or indication of the sense of place. It exudes thoughtlessness and indifference. Even more egregious is the urban furniture referred to as hostile, callous, or defensive architecture in English, or mean bench and exclusionary art in Japanese.[6] The benches with a curvy shape, an uneven seating surface, or, more typically, dividing armrests, are specifically designed to prevent unhoused people from resting and sleeping, their aesthetics complicated by the innocuous, or sometimes even elegant or artsy appearance. Such exclusionary measure becomes painfully obvious with a series of pointed spikes around a store window or under an overpass, aggressively signalling the message, “no loitering allowed.”

So far, the aesthetic gifts offered or denied have been fairly obvious. In comparison, to appreciate the care embodied in the next set of examples requires perceptual acuity and imaginative engagement because they address special needs. In Japan, a small shelf is commonly placed below a counter at stores, banks, post offices, hotels, airports, and ATM machines, where one can put a pocketbook and other belongings while tending to transactions.[7] An even smaller shelf with a half circle cut out lets one rest a cane and an umbrella, while an umbrella stand is sometimes located near the entrance to the building. The different lengths of subway hanging straps accommodate people with differing heights. Public bathrooms are equipped with a baby seat attached to the wall to free a parent to tend to her needs. Some clothes feature big buttons with diagonal buttonholes for easy maneuver for those who are dexterity-challenged, such as children, senior citizens, and people suffering from arthritis. The end of a toilet paper roll is folded in a triangular shape not only for a more pleasant visual impression but also for the ease of pulling the paper. Finally, a well-known children's tune or a bird's chirping is used to announce safe crossing of a street to the visually challenged, the sounds much gentler than the harsh mechanical staccato sounds often heard in the cities in the United States and Europe.

None of these objects gives aesthetic delight the way the decorative patterns underfoot do. However, they provide care by responding to the needs incurred by certain people or occasions. From the aesthetic point of view, we may further distinguish those which provide care by their sheer existence and placement regardless of the sensuous features, such as a baby seat, a shelf under the counter, and a cane holder, from those which provide care by their specific design, such as the buttonholes and the sound for safe street crossing.

The final example is the OXO brand vegetable peeler, which is a redesign of the basic metal peeler. Its enlarged handle made with a non-slip plastic and rubber material makes for easy grip, which is further enhanced by flexible fins to prevent the peeler from slipping. In addition, an oversized hole at the end of the handle makes for easy hanging, particularly for the visually impaired. Its designer was inspired by watching his wife with severe arthritis struggle with a conventional metal peeler to peel a potato. Akiko Busch characterizes this peeler's "kind of funky elegance that made it appealing to everyone" as embodying "consideration, empathy, and comfort."[8]

2.2. ATTRIBUTION OF MORAL QUALITIES TO ARTIFACTS?

Those who embrace the Western ontological framework may resist attributing moral qualities to objects because artifacts lack sentience, free will, and the kind of agency we humans exercise, and this makes them ineligible for moral blame or praise. Thus, according to this way of thinking, such characterizations amount to anthropomorphism, a quaint form of animism, or downright category mistake. When we characterize an artifact with morally-charged qualities, we must be referring to its designer or his intention, a proper subject for moral attribution. However, the perennial problem of determining the artist's intention is even more severe here, because we rarely know the designer of an artifact, let alone his intention.

But more importantly, in recent years, there has been an increasing attempt to attribute agency to artifacts by referring to the way in which they *shape* our actions. For example, Peter-Paul Verbeek points out that designed objects' agency is found in their "mediating role—one with an ethical dimension in that moral considerations are transformed, shaped, or even taken over."[9] Sometimes the object's design prevents us from doing something for paternalistic reasons. Examples include speed bumps, an inwardly curved fence along the bridge and overpass to prevent suicide and throwing things, a black image of a fly at the strategic point on the urinal to prevent spillage at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, and exit doors camouflaged with murals in the care facilities for dementia patients. Variously characterized as "actant," "commendable closure," and "libertarian paternalism," these objects "nudge" people toward or away from certain actions without closing off the possibility of engaging in different actions like not slowing down when driving over a speed bump, scaling the fence to jump, aiming at a different part of the urinal, or exiting through the door.[10]

So when architect Juhani Pallasmaa characterizes the ethos defining much of contemporary architectural structures as "arrogance," "narcissism," "impudence," "ego trips," and "showiness," while calling for "an architecture of humility" based upon modesty, courtesy, responsiveness, and care, he *is* referring to the structure's aesthetic features comprised of size, shape, spatial configuration, relationship with the surroundings, materials used, negotiability, comfort for the dwellers/visitors, and the like.[11] Similarly, when philosopher David E. Cooper characterizes gardens as "'unpretentious', 'graceful', 'dignified', 'free and open', 'generous'," or "pretentiousness, vainglory, and the 'enslavement' of nature," he *is* referring to the garden

design, not the character of the designers or their intention.[12] He thus claims that "I find it neither puzzling nor awkward to ascribe to buildings, say, qualities such as austerity, boldness, humility, friendliness, and generosity."[13]

This way of characterizing things may fit more comfortably to some non-Western cultural traditions and poetically-oriented discourses. For example, Sōetsu Yanagi, a Japanese art historian and the founder of *mingei* folk craft movement, characterizes innocuous and humble everyday things made by unknown craftsmen thus:

> […] to think of them as nothing but physical objects would be an error. They may simply be things, but who can say that they don't have a heart? Forbearance, wholesomeness, and sincerity—aren't these virtues witnesses to the fact that everyday objects have a heart?[14]

He describes their way of being in the world with us as "loyal companions" and "faithful friends" who "work thoughtlessly and unselfishly, carrying out effortlessly and inconspicuously whatever duty comes their way."[15] Their presence and the usefulness offer "an expression of humility."

An American poet, Pat Schneider, expresses a similar sentiment in her poem titled "The Patience of Ordinary Things." Ordinary things like clothes "wait respectfully in closets," the cup "holds the tea," and "towels drink the wet from the skin of the back."[16] Although we are the ones who created these artifacts to fulfil certain functions and it is also us who hang clothes in the closet, pour tea in a cup, and use a towel to dry our back, these objects are the ones which service our needs and make our management of daily life possible. Furthermore, they wait patiently and quietly until being called for their duty, ready to spring into action when needed. Thus, rather than dismissing these characterizations of things as philosophically misguided (according to the Western metaphysics) or nothing more than a poetic musing, we should take them seriously by being grateful for their presence in our life as our faithful and patience partners.

If those artifacts are our companions and friends who care for us, we should reciprocate by caring for them, not in the transactional sense but in the sense of honoring our intimate relationship with them. Technology scholar Steven Jackson reminds us of "a very old but routinely forgotten relationship of humans to the things in the world:

namely an ethics of mutual care and responsibility."[17] Designer Jonathan Chapman also points out that everyday objects "invade our lives and literally depend upon our care and attention in order to survive" and "it is this co-dependency that gives rise to deep sensations of cohesion, attachment and, potentially, love."[18] Care and maintenance of objects around us, therefore, is not a necessary evil or an inconvenience for living, to be done away with if possible. Instead, it is an integral part of what it is to live a good life in this world with things. But then how should we care for them specifically?

CARING FOR ARTIFACTS

The obvious answer is that we should handle our artifactual partners carefully so as not to damage, break, soil, or destroy, thereby fulfilling a kind of negative duties toward them. But just as caring for other people means doing something for them rather than, or in addition to, refraining from harming them, our care for artifacts includes proactively performing acts of care and maintenance by cleaning and repairing, among others. Our care can even extend to their disposal. Although a culture-specific practice, Japan's long-held tradition of *kuyō*, memorial service, deserves mention. Artifacts such as knives, needles, dolls, and today cell phones and seal stamps (*hanko* or *inkan*) used for certifying official documents are retired to temples or shrines for a proper service and disposal. I am certainly not suggesting that we should perform such a religious ritual, but the implied attitude of respect and gratitude is worth considering, particularly in light of the contemporary consumerist practice of nonchalantly throwing them away as trash when they can no longer serve our needs.

3.1. INVISIBILITY OF CARE AND MAINTENANCE WORK

Regardless of how we dispose of artifacts, however, we perform care and maintenance activities all the time. These activities, "reproductive labor" in the Marxist framework, tend to remain rather invisible, compared to supposedly more "productive," "creative," and "innovative" activities, such as conducting business, making things, teaching, and dispensing medical care. Little do we realize that these so-called productive activities are supported by care and maintenance work performed behind the scenes or after the hour, a blind spot Steven Jackson calls a "productionist bias."[19] Nowhere was this hierarchy of visibility and accompanying prestige and reward apparent during the pandemic when we praised medical professionals as "essential workers" and "heroes," but not the cleaning crew and garbage collectors whose work is equally essential and dangerous.

Less dramatically, the discourse on cooking with its focus on the productive and creative act rarely mentions washing pots, pans, and dishes. Luce Giard's essay on "Doing Cooking" is one exception, where she describes the cook's "succession of gestures and steps … from the dining room to the kitchen to clear away the dishes; once again in the kitchen to wash and put things away," while calling attention to "the length of cleaning tasks" of some cooking gadgets.[20]

Thus, cleaning, a major part of care and maintenance of the artifactual world, suffers from the unjust distribution of the sensible, to borrow Jacques Rancière's term, and this productionist bias is best illustrated by today's design practice. While increasingly paying attention to easy disassembly and recyclability, today's design discourse seldom addresses the need for care and maintenance, namely cleaning and repair. Architecture is a prime example.

Its 'post-occupancy' condition, inevitably brought about by people's use, wear and tear, and the accumulation of dirt and mess, rarely garners attention in the design process. In particular, the high maintenance demanded by modernist buildings made of glass does not receive adequate considerations because it highlights their raw materiality and compromises their aspiration toward dematerialization. When it comes to things of daily use, the industry strategy of planned obsolescence and aesthetically-driven perceived obsolescence makes it virtually impossible to repair things, exacerbating the throw-away culture associated with excessive consumerism.[21]

3.2. ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS

Some art projects illuminate this labor-intensive, time-consuming, and challenging maintenance work. Today's leading Japanese designer, Hara Kenya, states in his book, *Cleaning*, that "humans are living beings who continuously clean themselves and their environment," and documents diverse modes of cleaning from all over the world: sweep, dust, blow, beat, wash, wipe, smooth, rake, groom, purify, scrub, scrape, erase, scoop, remove, and clear, ranging from familiar acts of house cleaning and washing dishes we perform daily to those requiring professional expertise, such as cleaning the inside mechanism of a watch and dusting a large buddha sculpture.[22]

The 2008 film *Koolhaas Housework* documents the elaborate and complex cleaning regimen of a cleaning lady for an unusual house designed by Rem Koolhaas, named "Best Design of the Year" in 1998 by *Time* magazine. This film presents her hardship, though

accompanied by resilience, patience, and ingenuity. Other examples include the window washing performance of Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's *Le Baiser/The Kiss* (1999) at Mies van der Rohe's Fransworth House, a 1992 performance piece by Job Koelewijin, *Cleaning the Rietveld Paviljoen*, in which his mother and three aunts clad in a traditional attire thoroughly clean the glass box building of the Rietveld Academy, and Jeff Wall's large-scale photograph, *Morning Cleaning* (1999), featuring a janitor cleaning Mies van de Rohe's German Pavilion created for the 1929 Barcelona International Expo. Sometimes the cleaning activity becomes fully visible and creates a spectacle of its own, as seen in *Gehry's Vertigo* (1997), a film documenting the glass cleaning of Bilbao MOMA, and the cleaning of Louvre's glass pyramid performed by a robot since 2002.

The inherent irony of a cleaning task is that it is successful when *its own* trace is invisible: no streak after window washing and no sweeping marks on the sidewalk. Removing undesirable elements like dirt, dust, and stain to restore the original appearance of things does not seem to involve imagination, sophisticated skills, creativity, or sensibility, all considered necessary for an aesthetically-charged productive and creative work. Because of this low regard, it is not surprising that cleaning has traditionally been relegated to women and the economically, culturally, and educationally disadvantaged, such as immigrants and racial minorities, creating a fertile ground for exploitation. Here again, artistic intervention helps to raise awareness of both the exploitative nature of the cleaning-scape and the indispensable role it plays in the maintenance of the environment. In comparison with the films and photography mentioned before, performance pieces in which artists *themselves act* offer a social critique through their own cleaning gestures.

Perhaps the best-known and considered to be a pioneering work is *Hartford Wash*, an American artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' first performance piece of her Maintenance Art Performance Series, based on her 1969 Care Manifesto: "Culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay."[23] This janitorial work of literally getting on her hands and knees to wash the front steps of the museum entrance for four hours is a feminist critique of the institution of museums and artworld at the time, which virtually denied women's entry, particularly after motherhood. She used diaper cloths to wipe off the wet surface of the steps, a reference to the same material used by mostly male museum conservators for their work. At the same time, she compares her swirling

movement with a wet mop to Jackson Pollack's action painting, grudgingly enjoying this meagre freedom granted to a female artist, while remarking, "Jackson Pollack never changed diapers."[24]

Less known but equally politically charged is a short-lived Japanese group, Hi-Red Center's 1964 performance piece in Tokyo, restaged later outside of Japan in such places as New York City (1966) and the campus of Wesleyan University (2016).[25] With flyers notifying this cleaning event, the group members wearing a white lab coat and mask posted an official-looking 'cleaning in process' notice and engaged in mostly inane cleaning actions, such as scrubbing the sidewalk with a tiny toothbrush and using a fine silk cloth and cotton balls for wiping. These absurd gestures were a critical commentary on the Japanese government's efforts to clean up the host city of the Olympic Games, the first post-war event with a global reach, which included removing homeless and undesirable people from the street.

In his 1972 *Ausfegen* (*Sweeping Up*), Joseph Beuys and his two international students swept Karl-Marx Square after the May first celebration, collected the rubbish in bags and installed them along with the tools used for sweeping in a nearby gallery. Considered a gesture of protest against the leftist politics which celebrated workers and their unions without paying attention to those who had to clean up after the celebration, this piece reminds us of Ukeles' rhetorical question, "After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"[26] These and other performance pieces raise our awareness of the indispensable role cleaning plays to maintain an optimal environment for everyone.

In this regard, the Japanese tea ceremony is noteworthy for including the cleaning act of both the host and the guest in this participatory art dating back to the sixteenth century. The host cleans implements and the tea bowl with a cloth. The guest uses her fingers to wipe off the rim of the bowl from which she drank the tea, followed by cleaning her fingers with a small piece of paper tucked in the fold of her kimono. These gestures elevate the status of this generally disdained activity through elegantly choreographed movements, embodying the respect for the implements and the other person.

THE FIRST-PERSON AESTHETICS OF PERFORMING CARE AND MAINTENANCE WORK

However, does raising the profile of cleaning highlighted by these art projects help change our attitude toward the cleaning work we

ourselves carry out in our daily life? How can we use their gestures to inform our own experience? Do we start performing these acts *as if* we are in a performance art project?

Let me suggest several possibilities. First, we can become aware of the aesthetic potential of our cleaning acts, both in terms of bodily engagement and the ensuing results. For example, window washing can be practiced as a kind of painting with washing tools to create streaks and bubbles which can be quite fascinating, as seen in Manglano-Ovalle's *Kiss*. Furthermore, the sweeping arc movement of his arm and the tool can invite us to become attuned to the rhythmic movement of the body and the tool, creating a kind of dance. One could also tune into the regular swishing sound made by sweeping the ground with a broom, heard at the beginning of the 2023 film *Perfect Days*, which incidentally features a public toilet cleaner in Tokyo as the main character. Or, more typically, we can take pleasure in transforming the appearance of an object and restoring order even if temporarily, as described by Yi-Fu Tuan:

> When I vacuum the carpet and create neat swathes of flattened fibers, […] there is necessarily an aesthetic tinge to the satisfaction. All these activities are attempts to maintain or create small fields of order and meaning, temporary stays against fuzziness and chaos, which can be viewed, however fleetingly, with the pleasure of an artist.[27]

The following account of doing laundry and ironing captures both the aesthetic delight in the engagement of many senses while performing this act as well as in the end product. For Cheryl Mendelson, laundry is "sensually pleasing, with its snowy, sweet-smelling suds, warm water and lovely look and feel of fabric folded or ironed, smooth and gleaming."[28] She feels similarly about ironing by declaring that it

> gratifies the senses. The transformation of wrinkled, shapeless cloth into the smooth and gleaming folds of a familiar garment pleases the eye. The good scent of ironing is the most comfortable smell in the world. And the fingertips enjoy the changes in the fabrics from cold to warm, wet to dry, and rough to silky.[29]

She characterizes such experience as "modest, quiet, private pleasures" and "valuable even though they are nothing that there ever could—or should—be a buzz about."[30] The additional reward of such

a humble delight is further "physical pleasures—the look of favorite clothes restored to freshness and beauty, the tactile satisfaction of crisp linens in beautifully folded stacks"; "crisp, smooth sheets (that) dramatically change the aesthetic appeal of your bed and heighten your sense of repose"; and "the anticipation of feeling good or looking good in garments and linens restored to freshness and attractiveness through one's own competence and diligence."[31] Though not as powerful or dramatic as an aesthetic experience of art, these humble pleasures can have a cumulative effect to brighten the otherwise mundane and often boring chore.

Furthermore, despite the common impression that cleaning is a mindless task requiring little skill or knowledge, repeated practice is needed for us to acquire embodied knowledge and discriminatory sensibility. For example, varied materials require different cleaning methods, ranging from vigorous scrubbing to gentle wiping. We learn from trial and error the direction of scrubbing and how much force should be applied when wiping. When washing something, the temperature of the water and the kind of cleaning agent need to be adjusted to the material. It is true that there are many manuals for cleaning, and we rely on them particularly when cleaning something for the first time. However, more often than not, like cooking, we acquire embodied knowledge and discriminatory perception from repeated experiences and watching others, often family members, and participating in the act.

We also learn from experience that some things should not be thoroughly cleaned, such as cast-iron pans and woks, and a perfectly cleaned and impeccably organized space does not necessarily provide a warm, welcoming, and comfortable domestic space. Such space is experienced as unlivable, as Edith Fransworth complained about the house designed for her by Mies van der Rohe. The same is said about Philip Johnson's Glass House which maintains its severe perfection with discreet markings to indicate where the objects should be placed.[32] Some even advocate the need for a "perfect mess" and "creative disorder" which, according to them, promote flexibility, improvisational skills, and inspirations for novel connections, in comparison with perfect order and neatness which "tend to be more rigid and slower to respond to changing demands, unexpected events, and new information."[33]

Thus, *indiscriminate* cleaning and tidying is not desirable, and a fine aesthetic sensibility, along with practical considerations, is required

to determine the appropriate degree of cleanliness and order. This issue often creates fierce controversies among art restorers, as was the case with the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel. It also creates funny (for us) but serious (for curators and artists) situations in which the cleaning crew's overzealous action destroys a work of art by scrubbing an object or taking out what they thought was trash. Notable examples include Joseph Beuys' *Badewanne* (1960), a dirty-looking bathtub scrubbed clean, and Demian Hirst's 2001 installation at a London Eyestorm Gallery featuring rubbish from his studio, which was cleaned away.[34]

In this regard, different cleaning strategies for Japanese gardens employed by the sixteenth century tea master who is also credited for establishing wabi aesthetics, Sen no Rikyu, are instructive. In one case, he cleaned fallen cherry blossoms completely, only to shake some branches so a few blossoms fell on the ground as if by chance. In another case, he cleared all the morning glories blooming in profusion while putting one in a vase to decorate the alcove of the tea hut. These cleaning strategies subsequently gave rise to several practices, ranging from doing nothing and clearing the steppingstones and paths to making creative use of fallen leaves and pine needles by gathering them around a tree or a stone lantern in a garden.

In comparison, contemporary domestic landscaping in the US is dominated by a green lawn: perfectly smooth, weed-free, and clean cut. Although the environmental harm caused by its maintenance has become well-known, more environmentally sound wildflower gardens are criticized for appearing messy and disorderly, sometimes even invoking a municipal penalty for their unkempt appearance. By arguing for the importance of cultural sustainability along with ecological sustainability, landscape architect Joan Nassauer recommends "placing unfamiliar and frequently undesirable forms inside familiar, attractive frames for messy ecosystems" by using cues like a neat border or a fence to give people a clue that what may appear to be unkempt is actually worthy of our care.[35] This is because the "visible evidence of care and stewardship often elicits a response that is not only normative [...] but also aesthetic," and, as an immediate response, "it may be even more potent in affecting behavior."[36]

WORKING *WITH* THE WORLD

As indicated by the garden examples, cleaning negotiates a balance between nature and artifice. Even without the obvious natural

elements to be cleaned, such as leaves and flowers, the accumulation of dust, grime, and aging effect, is a process of nature. Trying to arrest it is inane, as we know all-too-well from having to clean things and spaces over and over. But the frustration we feel is due to our desire to halt nature's process. What if, instead, we accept that it is part of life, the process is ongoing, and we share our lives with such a process? What if we regard managing our daily lives as a collaborative venture with the world that is in continuous motion? We should be working *with*, not *against* or *irrespective of*, nature's process and trying to find a balance between letting nature take its course and exerting artifice. The Japanese designer Hara thus states:

> […] when nature is left to its own devices, dust and fallen leaves pile up, and plants thrive wildly. As a result, historically, human beings have lived by accepting nature to a certain extent and also keeping it moderately in check. […] We must allow nature a moderate reign, neither over-sweeping the fallen leaves nor over-pruning the greenery.[37]

An Italian designer, Ezio Manzini, suggests an analogy between the artifactual world and a garden where things are constantly changing, and encourages us to develop a fruitful relationship with them through care and maintenance.[38]

I have tried to show that cleaning is not a mindless, mechanical task but requires aesthetic sensibility, discrimination, embodied knowledge, and practice. However, it is not clear whether raising awareness in this way and bestowing aesthetic gravitas to cleaning can overcome the stubbornly negative attitude we hold toward cleaning work. There are much easier and physically less taxing ways of gaining aesthetic pleasure than vacuuming a room, sweeping the sidewalk, and scrubbing pots and pans. Furthermore, what we must deal with is often downright unpleasant: smelly socks, dust, grime, mold, and rubbish. We may remain wishful that cleaning be performed by somebody else. As long as they are not exploited and their work is properly recognized, respected, and sufficiently compensated, aren't we better off being liberated from such work?

Or isn't it even better if we can relegate these works to robots or things themselves by advancing technology and material science, thus eliminating the necessity of cleaning by humans altogether? Such inventions add to the list of technological wonders in Francis Bacon's technotopia, *New Atlantis*, posthumously published in 1626,

which includes holography, genetic engineering, fortified food and drink, submarine, and airplane, among others. Indeed, Lance Hosey, an architect, notes that "designers long have fantasized about a perfect product that cleans itself, heals itself, and never breaks—a maintenance-free object."[39] With the invention of such products, our world will approach the hypothetical world imagined by Elisabeth Spelman which is "filled with unchanging unbreakable eternal objects," a material version of Platonic forms.[40] We certainly cannot deny many benefits of such a technological advancement and welcome maintenance-free airplanes and bridges.

With the advent of 'smart homes,' the trend seems to be to minimize, and ultimately do away with, the need for our physical engagement with the care and maintenance of our environment. However, the total liberation from care work for the artifactual world is neither possible nor desirable. In the first place, it is not possible because even if robots, new materials, or AI liberate us from care and maintenance of the objects of daily use, they themselves need care and maintenance. But more importantly, it is not desirable because we lose an opportunity to cultivate an engaged relationship with the environment, work *with* the world collaboratively, appropriately, and sensitively, and enhance the ability and skill to improvise. Living in such a technotopia will minimize being in tune with the world's rhythm, such as growth, seasonal change, weather conditions, aging process, and working *with* them.

Furthermore, pursuing technological fix to its ultimate goal, the elimination of the need for care and maintenance of the world, leaves the deep-rooted assumption unquestioned: that such work is not worthy of human endeavor. The failure to raise a fundamental question regarding this assumption parallels one of the criticisms given to a feminist attempt to demand wages for housework done by housewives: it neglects to challenge the capitalist and patriarchal belief that the value of any work is gauged by the wages earned.[41] While not denying the value of various technological innovations to ease the burden of such work, I suggest we also need a paradigm change from regarding care and maintenance a necessary evil of managing everyday life in this world to an indispensable task of what it takes to inhabit this world. The wholesale endorsement of Baconian march toward 'progress' and 'advancement' discourages us from cultivating a much-needed humility to recognize our limitations as well as responsibility. Living in a world where we are completely free of care and maintenance work will exacerbate the

mentality largely responsible for today's environmental crisis that we can foul our nest all we want because it will somehow clean and repair itself. What we desperately need today is a resolve not to foul our environment in the first place, as well as a recognition that *we* are the one responsible for the care and maintenance of the world, as *it* cares for *us*.

Finally, cleaning as a care act for the environment is also a care act for the people around us. Cleaning our house creates a safe, pleasant, and comfortable space not only for ourselves but also for those who share the same space. Sweeping the sidewalk is a salute to our neighbors and passersby. Cleaning a town square, beach, and a public sculpture encourages the residents' civic pride, as well as welcoming visitors with a sense of place. All these acts promote sharing our lives and experiences in an optimal setting.

In conclusion, I suggest a paradigm change regarding the status and significance of the so-called reproductive work, namely care and maintenance like cleaning. I also advocate all of us to participate in practicing such work.[42] Performing such activities invokes a surprisingly rich aesthetic potential and helps us recognize and affirm our way of being in this world, which we share with everybody and everything around us. Through cleaning acts, we are fashioning the world, and it is an ongoing activity participated by others as well. It is a cooperative venture by investing our whole being, body, mind, emotion, imagination, and creativity, and we miss something important if we *never* take part in this venture ourselves. We also realize that a good life is not necessarily premised upon making our lives easier and care-free by relegating these tasks to other people, machines, or the things themselves. Only by directly engaging with the world and working collaboratively can we practice our authentic mode of living.

1 *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, available at https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf.
2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1968), 429, emphasis added; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (The Modern Library. 1968), 539; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1974), 241.
3 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Capricorn Press, 1958), 47.
4 The visual images of some examples in this paragraph can be found in my *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 152-163.
5 The visual images of some examples in this paragraph can be found in my *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, 164-166, and *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life* (Bloomsbury, 2022), 94-98.
6 The visual images of some examples in this paragraph can be found in my *Aesthetics of Care*, 110-111. For more discussion of these examples, see Robert Rosenberger, *Callous Objects: Designs against the Homeless* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) and "On Hostile Design: Theoretical and Empirical Prospects," *Urban Studies* 1, no. 11 (2019): 1-11. For Japanese examples and discussion, see Tarō Igarashi, *Dare no tameno Haijo Āto? (For Whose Sake Is Exclusionary Art?)* (Iwanami Shoten, 2022).
7 The visual images of some examples in this paragraph can be found in my *Aesthetics of Care*, 100-103.
8 Akiko Busch, *The Uncommon Life of Common Objects: Essays on Design and the Everyday* (Metropolis Books, 2004), 84.
9 Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design* (The Pennsylvania State University, 2005), 216.
10 The example of speed bumps and the notion of actant are from Bruno Latour, "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts," in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (MIT Press, 1992): 225-258. The example of the fence and the notion of commendable closure are from Robert Rosenberger, *Callous Objects* and "On Hostile Design." The example of the urinal and the notion of libertarian paternalism is from Richard H. Thayer and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (Penguin Books, 2008).
11 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Toward an Architecture of Humility," *Harvard Design Magazine* 7, 1999: 22-5. The quoted terms are scattered throughout this article.
12 David E. Cooper, "Human Landscapes, Virtue, and Beauty," presented at a conference on *Ethics and Aesthetics of Architecture and the Environment*, New Castle University, July 11-13, 2012, retrieved from academia.edu., 3.
13 David E. Cooper, "Beautiful People, Beautiful Things," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 3 (2008): 258.
14 Soetsu Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, trans. Michael Brase (Penguin Classics, 2018), 35.
15 Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, 36 for these passages and 37 for the next passage.
16 Pat Schneider, "The Patience of Ordinary Things," in *Another River: New and Collected Poems* (Amherst Writers and Artists Press, 2005), 111.
17 Cited by María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 211.
18 Jonathan Chapman, *Emotionally Durable Design: Objects, Experiences & Empathy* (Earthscan, 2006), 72.
19 Steven J. Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, et al (The MIT Press, 2014), 221-39.
20 Luce Giard, "Doing Cooking," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, eds. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, tr. Timothy J. Tomasik (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 199, 212.
21 See my *Aesthetics of Care*, 147-50.
22 Kenya Hara, *Cleaning* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2023).
23 Patricia C. Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* (Queens Museum, 2016), 210. See this book for the visual image of Ukeles' *oeuvre*, including her entire *Manifesto*.
24 *Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Cleaning the museum – maintenance art*, Khan Academy (2019), accessed March 1, 2024, https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/conceptual-and-performance-art/performanceart/v/ukeles-washingtracksmaintenance ().
25 For this group's projects, see William Marotti's "Creative Destruction: The Art of Akasegawa Genpei and Hi-Red Center," *Artforum* 51: 6 (2013): 193-201.
26 Cited by Lucy Lippard, "Never Done: Women's Work by Mierle Laderman Ukeles," in Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles*, 17.
27 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture* (Island Press, 1993), 101 and 100.
28 Cheryl Mendelson, *Laundry: The Home Comforts Book of Caring for Clothes and Liens* (Scribner, 2005), xiv.
29 Mendelson, *Laundry*, 99.
30 Mendelson, *Laundry*, xv.
31 Rick Marin, "A Scholar Tackles the Wash," *New York Times* (Sept. 29, 2005), Mendelson, 99 and xiv-xv.
32 See Kevin Melchionne's "Living in Glass House: Domesticity, Interior Decoration, and Environmental Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (1998): 191-200.
33 Eric Abramson and David H. Freedman, *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder* (Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 78.
34 For a discussion of *Badewanne* in comparison with the Japanese aesthetics of wabi-sabi, see Eda Keskin's "Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics and Joseph Beuys's *Badewanne* (1960)," in *Imperfectionist Aesthetics in Art and Everyday Life*, ed. Peter Cheyne (Routledge, 2023): 131-141. For Damien Hirst's installation, see "The Art of Rubbish" and "Cleaner Clears up Hirst's Ashtray Art" in *The Guardian* (October 19, 2001).

35 Joan Iverson Nassauer, "Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames," *Landscape Journal* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 161.
36 Joan Iverson Nassauer, "Care and Stewardship: From Home to Panet," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 100 (2011): 322.
37 Hara, *Cleaning*, 484.
38 Ezio Manzini, "Prometheus of the Everyday: The Ecology of the Artificial and the Designer's Responsibility," in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*, ed. Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 239.
39 Lance Hosey, *The Shape of Green: Aesthetics, Ecology, and Design* (Island Press, 2012), 105.
40 Elisabeth V. Spelman, *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World* (Beacon Press, 2002), 5.
41 The critique of this feminist strategy is developed by bell hooks in the chapter on "Rethinking the Nature of Work" in *Feminist Theory* (Routledge, 2014): 96-107.
42 I realize that I could be accused of ablism. Physical engagement involved in caring for the world that I have been discussing is not possible for those who are physically challenged. For them, the only means of taking care of the world will be pushing a button or issuing a voice command. My concern is that the able-bodied among us are also moving toward this kind of minimum engagement, wasting the gift of our ability to perform full physical engagement with the world.