Chapter 8

FRAMES, HANDLES AND LANDSCAPES: GEORG SIMMEL AND THE AESTHETIC ECOLOGY OF THINGS

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The debate between so-called formalists, who are interested in the inner mechanics of visual, literary and sonic objects, and so-called historicists, who see art through the lens of ideology, discourse and society, has well and truly run out of steam. As I have argued elsewhere (de la Fuente 2007; 2010a; 2010b; 2015), there has recently been a renewed emphasis on the 'agencies' or 'affordances' of art (Acord and DeNora 2008; Gell 1998), on the materiality of aesthetic practices (Mukerji 1983), the kinds of passions engendered by art forms (Benzecry 2011; Hennion 2005), and even grudging recognition that social scientists interested in aesthetic matters may have something to learn from art historians and psychologists of art (Tanner 2004). If I had to nominate one prevalent characteristic within these trends in aesthetic thinking, it would be a desire to 'reanimate' what we mean by 'context'. Context itself has become something that we can't take for granted or assume in some a priori manner. If I can borrow from recent literatures in geography on the dynamic and relational character of place and space, we need a type of thinking that re-awakens or brings back to life 'Dead Context' (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000). Context as a living organism is much more than the 'lived experience' of the subject – that line of inquiry reinforces the assumption of an unbridgeable gap between materiality and sentience. A re-animated concept of context will need to be relational and dynamic, focused on both possibility and constraint, attentive to 'Life' as well as to 'form'.

We have now entered the thought-universe and preoccupations of one Georg Simmel: sociologist, philosopher, social psychologist, aesthetician, art historian and theorist of everyday life. My desire here is to bring Simmel's

thought into dialogue with ecological authors such as Gregory Bateson (1973), James Jerome Gibson (1966; 1979) and Tim Ingold (1993; 2000) who have sought to move beyond reductionist accounts of context. This is a dialogical rather than co-opting move on my part. In particular, I will address how in his reflections on topics such as 'the picture frame', 'the handle' and the 'philosophy of landscape', Simmel (1965a; 1994; 2007) show a significant grasp of the aesthetic ecology of things (on the concept of an 'aesthetic ecology', see Murphy 2014). The ecological logic of his thought is revealed in the following statement: 'Each thing is a mere transitional point for continuously flowing energies and materials, comprehensible only from what has preceded it, significant only as an element of the entire natural process' (Simmel 1994, 11). My argument is not that Simmel pre-empted the kind of ecological aesthetic theories I am considering here (although he did directly influence the 'urban ecologies' approach of Robert Ezra Park and the Chicago School); nor that a 'Batesonian' or 'Ingoldian' reading ought to supplant existing interpretations of Simmel's *sociological aesthetics* as Neo-Kantian or Vitalist (Frisby 1991; Lash 2005). My claim rather is that Simmel shares the insights of ecological thinkers regarding how aesthetic perception is not reducible to either the internal mechanisms of the perceiving subject nor to the properties of the external environment but rather the complex interplay of both.

But before covering either Simmel's or ecological approaches to aesthetics, I think we need to say a few things regarding why aesthetic patterning matters in everyday life and, hence, why such approaches merit close scrutiny. In an essay titled 'Ornamented Worlds and Textures of Feeling', cultural psychologist Jan Valsiner (2008, 67) makes the point that our 'everyday life contexts […] are saturated with highly repetitive patterns of visual and auditory kinds'. He uses very similar language to Bateson and Gibson, suggesting '[A]ll encounters of organisms with environments can be viewed as processes of coordinating patterns' (Valsiner 2008, 67). Valsiner (2008, 67) notes that the encounter between organism and environment takes the form of 'camouflage of body patterns […] mating based on body display […] textures of surfaces for walking, sucking, swimming, or crawling'. Of particular interest is the phenomenon of ornamentation which seems to predate the notion of 'beauty for its own – aesthetic – sake' and which therefore suggests some long-standing 'social reasons for creating decorated patterns' (Valsiner 2008, 69). The grammar of patterns is evident in the way that decoration exaggerates or downplays features within the field of perception; which in turn governs how affective tension grows and escalates within the viewer or user. In this respect, 'plain' and 'fancy' are relative terms, as are minimalism and *Churriguresco*. They are relative to the holistic field that the patterns generate. From such

insights, Valsiner (2008, 77) goes on to hypothesize the following general tale of ornamentation and aesthetic patterning more generally: 'An ornamented world keeps the experiencing person "within the field" – not letting him or her escape, while at the same time not particularly demanding attention or goals-oriented actions in relations to these patterns.' As we shall see, keeping the social actor 'within the field' is one of the central mechanisms of what we are calling the aesthetic ecology of things.

Simmel's Sociological Aesthetics

Situating Simmel's sociological aesthetics in relationship to traditions of ecological thought runs counter to the dominant image of him as a formalist Kantian who emphasizes the autonomy of the aesthetic or as a defender of the late nineteenth-century 'art for art's sake' school. These partial readings of his work have arguably held back his reception in fields such as sociology, cultural studies and aesthetic criticism. One doesn't have to go far to find these kinds of themes even amongst supporters of Simmel's thought. Thus, the translators of *Rembrandt* feel obliged to recognize, '[F]rom the point of view of much current analysis, Simmel's insistence on the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere and his meticulous avoidance of reference to social, cultural, or autobiographical context may seem hopelessly retrograde, even reactionary' (Scott and Staubmann 2005, xvii). Likewise, an early advocate of Simmel's aesthetic writings within American sociology suggests the 'thesis that art is a reality independent of life places Simmel within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French and English "art for art's sake" schools' (David 1973, 324). Interestingly, the same commentator notes that, for Simmel, the 'world [is] composed of multiple conflicting centres of organization' and that different units of life are often 'trying to organize the same materials around its own principles' (Davis 1973, 325). Hence, the separation of the spheres (art, morality and science) and human faculties (aesthetic judgement, ethics and reason) that one finds in Kant's philosophy are less clear cut in the case of Simmel. Davis (1973, 325) suggests that often in his aesthetic writings', 'Simmel's world […] looks more like Leibniz's *Weltanschauung* of self-actualizing monads or, even, the primitives of animistic world-view than Kant's' (Davis 1973, 325). The animistic sensibility may account for why, despite reservations about modernity and the underlying 'tragedy' of all culture, Simmel never buys into the Weberian thesis of disenchantment in any complete sense.

What Davis refers to as the animistic or pantheistic side is on full display in the essay 'Sociological Aesthetics'. It discusses the possibility of seeing everything and anything in the world aesthetically:

> Even the lowest, intrinsically ugly phenomenon can be dissolved into contexts of colour and form, of feeling and experience, which provides it with exciting significance. To involve ourselves deeply and lovingly with even the most common product, which, would be banal and repulsive in its isolated appearance, enables us to conceive of it, too, as a ray and image of the final unity of all things from which beauty and meaning flow. […] If we pursue this possibility of aesthetic appreciation to its final point, we find that there are no essential differences among things. Our worldview turns into aesthetic pantheism. (Simmel 1968, 69)

Thus, rather than autonomy being the governing principle of aesthetic phenomena, Simmel (1968, 9) seems to be arguing the opposite, emphasizing that aesthetic sensation stems from the unity of all things: 'The totality of beauty, the complete meaning of the world […] radiates from every single point' (Simmel 1968, 69). Furthermore, according to him, various non-art things can be perceived aesthetically and these include machines, organized production and political systems. Any phenomenon that involves contrast, comparability and the capacity for the transformation of value – that is, 'the moulding of the inspired out of the dull and the refined out of the raw' – can generate aesthetic apprehension. What unites aesthetic phenomena is that '[o]ur sensations are tied to differences, those of value no less than our sensations of touch or temperature' (Simmel 1968, 70). Beauty is a relational concept that can point upwards, downwards or sideward (i.e. it can direct us to appreciate the 'highest', 'lowest' or most 'comparable' case of something), but, in the end, the 'division of the world into lightness and darkness' is needed so that aesthetic stimulation and valuation can take place (Simmel 1968, 70). Without meaningful contrast, all the elements of the world would 'flow into one another formlessly' and the 'raw and lower forms' would not be able to act as the 'support and background for the refined, bright and exalted' (Simmel 1968, 70).

Gibson's Ecology of Aesthetic Perception

Like Simmel's 'Sociological Aesthetics', the ecological approach is thoroughly pantheistic in relationship to where aesthetic sensation may be unearthed. It also shares the sense, present in the Simmel essay, that the world would be formless without contrast; and that this contrast exists independently of the observer. Thus, in a proposition that echoes Simmel's discussion of light and darkness, the exalted and the earthly, Gibson (1979, 130) says: 'For terrestrial animals like us, the earth and the sky are a basic structure on which all lesser structures depend. […] We all fit into the substructures of the environment in our various ways.'

The world as the basis of endless aesthetic transformation and manipulation is a central theme in ecological approaches – only the latter refers to context as 'environment' and the possibilities present in it as *affordances*. Gibson (1979, 127), who is credited with coining the term, refers to the '*affordances* of the environment […] [as] what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill'. These affordances can take the shape of 'surfaces', 'substances', 'mediums' and 'objects'; and their list includes such things as 'terrain, shelters, water, fire, objects, tools, other animals, and human displays' (Gibson 1979, 127). Surfaces are particularly important for Gibson's theory of affordances as they are what 'separate substances from medium' (e.g. the walls and roof of my house afford comfort by separating me from water or too much air). Substances also guide the kinds of practical actions that the organism senses from elements of the environment. Whether something is flat or vertical, convex or concave, rigid or flexible/completely unstable, determines whether something 'affords support', is 'stand-on-able' or 'sink-into-able', 'climb-on-able or fall-off-able' or 'get-underneath-able' or 'bump-into-able' (Gibson 1979, 127–8).

Gibson (1979, 137) recognizes that the 'behavioural complexities' of affordances grow exponentially as objects such as 'tools, utensils and weapons' are developed and as 'manufactured displays become images, pictures, and writing'. But even technological complexity and more sophisticated media require the affordances of the environment. Vocalization requires 'air' for its transmission; there is no writing or painting without 'light' making visual perception possible; and furniture, buildings, parks and bridges would not exist nor be conceivable without a range of liquids and solids existing and being open to manipulation.

Are our aesthetic sensations, therefore, determined by the environment or do we impose qualities through observation, sensation and perception? For Gibson, as for most ecological authors, this is a nonsensical question. He suggests an affordance 'points two ways, to the environment and to the observer […] awareness of the world and of one's complementary relations to the world are not separate' (Gibson 1979, 139). This line of argument doesn't merely problematize subject-object dualisms. It also throws into doubt the notion that the primary role of aesthetic communication is to placate needs – psychological or symbolic – already present within a subject who manipulates external reality as he or she wishes.

Art and Aesthetic Patterns in Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*

We are so accustomed to thinking of aesthetic phenomena as a discursive or representational construct that we often forget that without arousal of

perception no aesthetic experience is possible. The theme that ecological approaches are not primarily discursive or representational is developed in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, where Bateson (1973, 102) writes: 'They say that "every picture tells a story," and this generalization holds for most art. […] But I want precisely to avoid analysing the "story".' The alternative, proposed by the author, is the following:

> I am concerned with what important psychic information is in the art object quite apart from what it may 'represent'. […] 'The style is the man himself' (Buffon). What is implicit in style, materials, composition, rhythm, skill and so on? […] The lions in Trafalgar Square could have been eagles or bulldogs and still carried the same (or similar) messages. […] And yet how different might their message have been had they been made of wood! […] The *code* whereby perceived objects or persons (or supernaturals) are transformed into wood or paint is a source of information about the artist and his culture. […] It is the very rules of transformation that are of interest to me – not the message. (Bateson 1973, 103)

What role then does *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* attribute to art in human affairs if what an aesthetic object represents may not be art's decisive dimension? Bateson (1973, 115–16) credits art with playing the role of confronting the 'quantitative limit' built into consciousness, the fundamental fact that 'all organisms must be content with rather little consciousness'. Because of the limits to perceptual awareness, the human organism resorts to habits and other unconscious reflexes. But these can only ever provide a limited perception of the world. Thus, the role art plays with respect to consciousness is to reveal the 'systematic nature of mind' (Bateson 1973, 118). This applies equally to prehistoric depictions of hunting in the Altamira caves or to Van Gogh's *Chair*, which are often interpreted as, respectively, 'sympathetic hunting magic' or as providing insight into 'what the artist "*sees*"' (Bateson 1973, 117). Bateson (1973, 117) suggests art assists mind in recognizing that the 'potentiality' of heightened consciousness exists, and that it resides 'in you and in me' (Bateson 1973, 117). Drugs, alcohol, dreams and even schizophrenia can release us from the selective or limited nature of consciousness; but only art serves as a 'corrective' through the application of skill, empathy and creative leaps – that is, deliberate or purposeful selection, if you like.

A Brief Excursus on Symmetry

Interesting, Simmel's 'Sociological Aesthetics' highlights an important theme within ecological approaches to aesthetic perception: namely the role of

'symmetry' and other patterns in human and natural affairs. He suggests the 'origin of all aesthetic themes is found in symmetry' and that '[B]efore man can bring an idea, meaning, harmony into things, he must first form them symmetrically' (Simmel 1968, 71–2). It should be emphasized that recognizing the importance of symmetry is not necessarily the same as seeing it as the sole or highest form of aesthetic ordering. Indeed, symmetry can have a range of sociological and political implications. Simmel (1968, 72) writes that the 'tendency to organize all of society symmetrically […] is shared by all despotic regimes' and that symmetry is also the aesthetic companion to 'rationalism'. The rational organization of society has its own 'aesthetic attraction', which we can see 'in the aesthetic appeal of machines' and the 'factory' and 'socialistic state' which only 'repeat this beauty on larger scales' (Simmel 1968, 74). Symmetry appeals because symmetrical patterning 'provides for the observing mind a maximum of insight […] [with] a minimum of intellectual effort' (Simmel 1968, 75). By contrast, the attraction of asymmetrical patterns is evident in Romantic notions of beauty, liberal conceptions of 'individualism', the worldviews of 'Rembrandt and Nietzsche' and modern floral arrangements which 'are no longer bound into bundles' and are either displayed 'individually' or 'at most are bound together rather loosely' (Simmel 1968, 75–6).

It is important to reflect on the fact that aesthetic orderings of the symmetrical and asymmetrical type aren't simply paradigms or worldviews conjoined by rules of association or mere likeness. As Rudolf Arnheim (1969, 54) proposes in *Visual Thinking*, 'To see an object in space means to see it in context', adding that 'the relations actually encountered on percepts are not simple.' His point is that the psychology of visual perception has often erred by seeing relatedness in terms of things like 'frequency' of association and 'resemblance'. Such modes of thinking about perception tend to assume that the things being perceived have discrete properties that remain largely unchanged as they enter new or different contexts. Arnheim proposes that colour is one of those quintessentially relational phenomena in which location, background and density will provide for different types of perceptual relations. In short, relatedness is connected to the 'place and function' of things within a field and 'similarity will exert its unifying power only if the structure of the total pattern suggests the necessary relation' (Arnheim 1969, 54–5). Thus, a colour or shape can look as if in harmony with other elements simply because the pairing of the two things suggests some kind of completion. Arnheim (1969, 64–5) writes: 'Symmetry is but a special case of fittingness, the mutual completion obtained by the matching of things that add up to a well-organized whole.'

Ecological approaches to aesthetic perception have followed suit. Bateson (1973, 385) – who devotes a significant portion of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* to the role of symmetry in anthropology, biology and cybernetics – proposes

that symmetry is a method for making non-random inferences about seemingly random events. He suggests this is especially important in the field of aesthetics: 'To the aesthetic eye, the form of a crab with one claw bigger than the other is not simply asymmetrical. It proposes a rule of symmetry and then subtly denies the rule by proposing a more complex combination of rules' (Bateson 1973, 385–6). Using the language of post-war information theory, Bateson explains that a pattern is a method for coping with the 'redundancies' of messages emanating from the environment:

> The message material is said to contain 'redundancy' if, when the sequence is received with some items missing, the receiver is able to guess at the missing items with better than random success. It has been pointed out that, in fact, the term 'redundancy' so used becomes a synonym for 'patterning'. It is important to note that this patterning of message material always helps the receiver to differentiate between signal and noise. (Bateson 1973, 389)

Thus, camouflage (which is designed to subvert communication) achieves its aims by 'breaking up the patterns and regularities in the signal' or by 'introducing similar patterns into the noise' (Bateson 1973, 390). Camouflage takes away the ability to block out the irrelevant things in the environment. At the other end of the spectrum to camouflage and noise lies the 'logician's dream that men should communicate by unambiguous digital signals' (Bateson 1973, 388). But what unambiguous codes gain in noise-reduction they lose in richness and expressiveness. Somewhere in between is the effective use of redundancy in which the blocking out of redundancies, paradoxically, heightens our attention to what is important. The author's example, is saying 'I love you' where tone and non-verbal communication become crucial. The effective use of redundancy is present in 'human kinesic communication, facial expression and vocal intonation', as well as in elaborations of such everyday patternings in 'art, music, ballet, poetry and the like' (Bateson 1973, 388).

The consequence of seeing symmetrical patterns as much more than resemblance and homogeneity is that states of harmony and balance, as well as their opposites, come to be seen as a function of how something is framed. This is not without consequence for Simmel's project of a sociological aesthetics. Arguably, he comes closest to seeing symmetry and asymmetry, less as contrasting paradigms or worldviews, and more as dynamic aesthetic totalities operating along an ecological continuum, in the essay 'The Aesthetic Significance of the Face' (Simmel 1965b). While the rest of the human body conveys expression primarily through kinaesthetic movement, and some parts of the body like the hand appear to have their own type of unity (for e.g. the fingers acting in concert), it is only the face where form and substance

combine such that 'fate cannot strike any one part without striking every other part at the same time' (Simmel 1965b, 276). In reflecting on the mutual interdependence of its elements, and the effects that even minor changes in facial expression can convey, Simmel returns to the theme of symmetry. However, in contradistinction to the treatment of symmetry in 'Sociological Aesthetics', he suggests here that it is precisely because 'the face consists of two halves which are similar to one another' that the face is able to achieve a high degree of individuality and expressiveness (Simmel 1965b, 279). The face is an aesthetic synthesis where the 'separateness of the individual features are complemented and balanced by the essential comparability of the two halves' (Simmel 1965b, 279). This, in turn, allows one aspect of human 'appearance' – the surface of the face – to become the central focal point for the 'veiling and unveiling of soul' (Simmel 1965b, 281). Or, as an ecological approach might have put it, the face is a cybernetic circuit designed to reveal the systematic nature of mind.

Bateson and Simmel on Framing

No metaphor has perhaps managed to bring psychology and cognitive science closer to art history and philosophical aesthetics (i.e. reunite the so-called *two cultures*) and into dialogue with each other than the notion of *framing*. The chapter of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* titled 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy' makes the observation, based on a visit to the San Francisco zoo, that mammals such as otters and monkeys are capable of engaging in expressive behaviour that can distinguish 'play' from actual 'combat' (Bateson 1973, 179). Bateson (1973, 179) infers from this that mammals can engage in the kind of 'metacommunication' that carries 'messages' about communication. He suggest that the ability to see something as 'play' rather than 'combat' is a framing procedure and that something similar happens when we distinguish jokes from actual statements, metaphors from literal expressions and dreams from real life. Bateson hypothesizes that schizophrenia is the inability to observe such boundaries.

Are ecological theories of framing very different to those of Simmel's? A rare synthesis of Bateson and Simmel is provided by Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) in *The Fine Line*, a book centrally concerned with boundaries and how social actors negotiate them. Zerubavel (1991, 11) proposes that framing is the activity of 'surrounding situations, acts, or objects with mental brackets' and that the significance of the frame is not in the 'contents' of what it frames but rather in the 'distinctive way in which it transforms the contents' meaning'. Frames allow us to make a 'mental switch from one "style" or mode of experiencing to another' as indicated by the 'bell that signals the end of a boxing match' or how actors entering the stage are 'immediately transform[ed]

into fictional characters' (Zerubavel 1991, 11). Regarding the picture frame, Zerubavel (1991, 11) says it is there to 'remind viewers that they cannot smell the flowers or eat the apples they see in pictures'.

Simmel himself theorized on the significance of the picture frame:

> The qualities of the picture frame reveal themselves to be those of assisting and giving meaning to [the] inner unity of the picture. […] The eye emphasizes the relationship of the picture to its centre from all sides. […] The fact that the frame is enclosed by two mouldings serves the closing function more than it does the synthetic one […] and it is precisely this which favours that island-like position which the work of art requires vis-a-vis the outer world. […] That is why the frame, through its configuration, must never offer a gap or a bridge through which, as it were, the world could get in or from which the picture could get out. (Simmel 1994, 12)

Given that authors such as Zerubavel (1999) are espousing a 'cognitive sociology' we might ask: is framing entirely cognitive? In the case of Simmel, I would argue it is not. Why? Firstly, the gaze is not an entirely cognitive or disembodied act as evident in Simmel's (1997, 12) claim that 'the gaze, like bodily movement, moves more easily from higher to lower' and that it is because the picture plane replicates aspects of embodiment that the 'coherence of the picture is subjected to a centrifugal dispersal'. Secondly, the types of affordances the frame evinces are not entirely separate from its design. Simmel (1997, 12) suggests that it is the 'design of the frame' which makes possible the 'continuous flowing of the gaze' and that this extends to rather banal or 'fortuitous' aspects of frames such as: 'the joints between its sides'; the 'outer sides of the frame' being raised 'compared with the inner sides'; as well as mouldings which, by framing the frame, give the sensation that any 'ornamentation' or 'profiling' are like a 'stream' running 'between two banks'. Thirdly, the qualitative properties of the frame matter. Simmel suggests that it is no surprise that wood is considered a superior material to cloth, that a large frame looks good on a small picture, and that nature photography often can exist happily without any frame.

In Simmel's framework, then, framing is not an empty metaphor and each thing framed 'dwells' in the world differently. The picture frame reminds us that the work of art, 'while it hangs in our room', does not 'disturb' our day-to-day sentient and perceptual ecologies; it is like an 'island in the world that waits until one approaches it and which one can as well pass by and overlook' (Simmel 1994, 14). The comparison is with a 'piece of furniture' which, whenever we 'make contact with it', constantly and immediately 'intervenes in our life and thus has no right to exist for itself' (Simmel 1994, 14). Furniture,

despite the craft, skill or design intent that has gone into it, does not possess what Gibson (1966, 235) called that 'special attitude of perception – the pictorial attitude'. Both furniture and paintings are 'modifications of pre-existing surfaces' but only a painting is 'made for the explicit purpose of being looked at' (Gibson 1966, 224).

However, Pictures Are Much More than Framed Objects

But are we so clear as to what paintings, or images more broadly, want from us? W. J. T. Mitchell's (2005, 31) *What Do Pictures Want?* treats artworks 'as if they had an intelligence and purposiveness of their own'. He admits that no 'modern, rational, secular person' will readily admit that pictures 'be treated like persons' (Mitchell 2005, 31). However, most of us are 'willing to make exceptions' when it comes to treating certain objects as having personhood. And, while '[e]veryone knows that a photograph of their mother is not alive they will still be reluctant to deface or destroy it' (Mitchell 2005, 31). Mitchell quips that if we could ask pictures questions they might answer that they have the following kinds of aspirations (NB: The book is after all entitled, *What do Pictures Want?*):

> [P]ictures would want to be worth a lot of money; they would want to be admired and praised as beautiful; they would want to be adored by many lovers. But above all they want a kind of mastery over the beholder. [What] paintings desire, in short, is to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder in what might be called 'the Medusa effect'. (Mitchell 2005, 35–6)

In the work of other authors, the issue of what aesthetic objects might want or aspire to is reconceptualized as one of causality or agency. One such author postulates that the role of such objects is to 'fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator' (Gell 1998, 23). This is the argument of anthropologist Alfred Gell's (1998, 16) *Art and Agency*, which defines agency as persons and things 'who/which are seen as initiating causal consequences'. Agency can therefore inhere 'in graven images, not to mention motor cars' as 'in practice, people attribute intentions and awareness to objects like cars and images of Gods' (Gell 1998, 17). The author provides with us a fascinating case study that challenges some of the assumptions and norms of the frame-ology we have been discussing in this section. In 1914, suffragette Mary Richardson, in protest at the death in prison of fellow activist Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst, attacked the Velazquez painting *Rokeby Venus*. Photographs taken at the time show the painting having suffered a series of deep, mostly diagonal wounds of the sort that might have been inflicted on a murdered corpse. Gell ponders

how and why Mary Richardson came to despise the painting so much that she conceived of it as a legitimate object for her anger at the death of a fellow suffragette. He concludes: 'The frenzied gestures of Richardson defacing the image so that its death corresponds to that of Pankhurst create the space in which the life of images and persons meet and merge together' (Gell 1998, 64).

The attack on the *Rokeby Venus* is also discussed by art historian David Freedberg (1989, 425), who cites it as a supreme case of 'iconoclasm' or art-making in reverse: 'When the iconoclast reacts with violence to the image and vehemently and dramatically attempts to break its hold on him or her, then we begin to sense its potential.' Contra the arguments of a literal frame-ology, we might say that the emotional and psychic space between viewer and object of aesthetic contemplation leaves room for both *iconophilia* and *iconophobia*. It blurs real and emotional space in a way that produces tangible 'affects' in the world. But, as we will see, paintings no more want to be slashed than vases want to be smashed. The latter want to be held and included in human actions.

Arriving at an ecological approach to pictures is therefore a complicated affair. Such an approach needs to deal with obvious cases such as the fact that art becomes art by virtue of literal and institutional framing (i.e. the museum as meta-frame). But it also needs to account for why – as Gell puts it – the pictorial space is one in which persons and images intermingle and passions can be aroused. However, intermingling is not the same as unbounded. Simmel (1965a, 267) writes that '[w]hile the canvas and pigment' in a picture are derived from shapes and materials found in reality, the work of art constructed out of these shapes and materials constitutes an 'ideal space which can no more come into contact with actual space than tones can touch smells'. The analogy is a striking one. In contrast to the well-worn metaphor of a painting as a window onto reality, Simmel is reminding us that things – including pictures, tones and smells – dwell within the world in all sorts of ways. Sometimes there are overlaps in these modes of dwelling but on the whole pictures are to other spatial configurations as tones are to smells.

Thinking about Handles

The intermingling of persons and objects in pictorial space could be said to have other aesthetic parallels, such as, for example, the intermingling of function and form in everyday aesthetic objects. In 'The Handle', Simmel's writes that what is most interesting about objects such as a 'utensil' or a 'vase' is that we have something that 'stands in two worlds at once' (1965a, 267). In other words, we need to be able to explain why some types of aesthetic objects are meant to be 'handled, filled and emptied, proffered, and set down here and there' (Simmel 1965a, 267). Of particular significance for Simmel's (1965a,

267) meditation are those objects which by virtue of being 'held in the hand […] [are] drawn into the movement of practical life'.

So it would seem that despite all the talk of aesthetic autonomy in Simmel's work phenomena can be unified despite major apparent differences in purpose and design. Indeed, we might say that Simmel's analogical mode of thinking is designed specifically to deal with the incongruous connections between things (de la Fuente 2008). Thus, the unity between handle and vase is compared to a 'man's arms which, having grown as part of the same organizational process as his torso, also mediate the relationship of the whole being to the world outside it' (Simmel 1965a, 269). 'The Handle' notes that the relationship of handle to object is emblematic of the role the hand plays in practical, aesthetic and psychic life generally. It is because of its ability to create and grasp things that the hand could be said to be a 'tool of the soul', a symbol of how the energies present within the 'process of life' can be unified and manipulated for a higher purpose (Simmel 1965a, 269).

To return to Simmel's overlap with ecological aesthetic thought, 'The Handle' often relies on vegetative and – as seen earlier – organic metaphors. There are times when the author seems to be relying on the implicit understanding that man-made and natural things share similar properties. When discussing how a human being holding a bowl reflects how the hand comes to constitute a 'mediating bridge' in which creating, holding and grasping are all possible, and transmit 'the impulse of the soul into the bowl [and] into its manipulation', Simmel (1965a, 270) opts for the following analogy: 'It is as if man were here utilizing the channels of natural flow of sap between stem and leaf in order to pour his own impulses into an external object, thereby incorporating it into the order of his own life' (Simmel 1965a, 270).

The notion that making and using are linked, and that the human capacity for intelligence and action more generally may be the thing uniting them, brings Simmel's exposition in 'The Handle' into implicit dialogue with recent writings on the significance of the hand in both creativity and material culture. The overwhelming emphasis of such literatures is that objects are an extension of the human body and practical activities – including creative ones – tend to blur the difference between subject and object. For example, architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa's (2009, 47–8) *The Thinking Hand* suggests: '[W]hen an axe or a sheath or a knife is being used, the skilled user does not think of the hand and tool as different and detached entities; the tool has grown to be a part of the hand.' In short, using an axe or sheath or knife is both a practical and aesthetic action involving the *artful* manipulation of material by hand. Thus, tools tend to evolve 'gradually through a process of small improvements, use and rejection', and their particular beauty springs from the many unintended and 'absolute causalities instead of being a materialization of an aesthetic

idea' (Pallasmaa 2009, 48). The beauty of tools emanates from the 'same pleasure of inevitability as living creatures; indeed, they possess the beauty of the human hand itself, the most perfect of all tools' (Pallasmaa 2009, 48–9).

Affordances: Or How to Make Sense of Coffeepots for Masochists

Simmel is perhaps too much the Neo-Kantian to accept the formula that the beauty and spiritual significance of objects lies primarily in their use. But he was clearly interested in the affordances of things and affordances are primarily about usage. In *Design of Everyday Things*, Donald Norman (2002, 9) suggests: '[A]ffordances provide strong clues to the operations of things.' His examples include:

> A chair affords ('is for') support and, therefore affords sitting. […] Glass is for seeing through, and for breaking. Wood is normally used for solidity, opacity, support, and for carving. Flat, porous, smooth surfaces are for writing on. […] Knobs are for turning. Slots are for inserting things into. Balls are for throwing or bouncing. […] A psychology of causality is […] at work as we use everyday things. (Norman 2002, 9)

There are strong echoes here with Simmel's (1997, 214) formulation that a 'chair exists so that one can sit on it, a glass in order that one can fill it with wine and take it in one's hand'. But an interesting comparison with 'The Handle' and *Design of Everyday Things* arises: if Simmel, on occasion, draws too strong a distinction between aesthetics and practicality, then Norman assumes that good design and utility go hand in hand. For the latter, aesthetics plays a role in why some things work and others don't, and the successful design of an object is thought to lie in such basic considerations as to whether you need instructions to use an object properly and whether its functions are immediately visible to the user. The overwhelming interest of *Design of Everyday Things* is thus to determine whether 'poor design causes unnecessary problems for their users' and whether common or recurring problems have 'simple solutions, which properly exploit affordances and natural constraints' (Norman 2002, 87). A recurring (negative) exemplar, for the author, is French artist Jacques Carelman's *Coffeepots for Masochists*, which is basically unusable as the handle and spout are on the same side. The object appears on the front cover of *Design of Everyday Things* and then re-appears in the 'Prologue' to *Emotional Design* (Norman 2002; 2005).

The *Coffeepot for Masochists* seems to exemplify Simmel's (1965a, 272) claim that the 'handle and spout [must] correspond to each other visually as the

extreme points of a vessel's diameter and that they must maintain a certain balance' so that the handle and spout can 'play' the role assigned to them. The object in question also lends support to Simmel's proposition that a vessel, no matter how aesthetically pleasing, is different from a work of art, in that it contains a link to the world of practical activity. Interesting, Norman (2002, 2) positions Carelman's coffeepot within the realm of art, suggesting it provides a 'delightful example of everyday things that are deliberately unworkable, outrageous, or otherwise ill-informed'. In *Emotional Design*, a book that is meant show us how cognition and emotion are intertwined in design, the *Coffeepot for Masochists* is depicted as an object that is 'entirely reflective', as against 'visceral' or 'behavioural', and that while 'not useful […] what a wonderful story it tells' (Norman 2005, 6).

However, is Norman's understanding of affordances sufficiently ecological or interested in the organism–environment relationship? Books such as *Design of Everyday Things* speak of the 'perceived and actual properties of the thing' in a way that strangely continues to keep the user and context separate (Norman 2002, 9). In some respects, the model is based more on 'cognitive science' than on ecology and what becomes 'invariant' is human consciousness and its relationship to pre-existing material properties. In *Perception of Environment*, Ingold (2000, 19) criticizes those attempts to explain relational situations in which the 'organism is specified genotypically, prior to its entry into the environment' and where the 'environment is specified as a set of physical constraints, in advance of the organisms that arrive to fill it'. We might say that not all discussions of affordances equally manage to deconstruct the subject-object dualism or to re-animate context as we would like.

Simmel and Contemporary Theories of Things

Thus, although he sometimes seems to regard useful objects as inferior to purely artistic ones, in many respects Simmel is much more convincing than an author such as Norman when it comes to how handles and spouts intersect with the energies and flows of everyday experience. The connection between an object and, say, the hand is not merely a question of perception, categorization or mental bracketing; it is a relationship consisting of energy-flows mediated by something called a handle. The handle directs the flow of connectivity between the object and the world, much as the 'spout' reverses the directionality of that connection: 'With the handle the world approaches the vessel; with the spout the vessel reaches out to the world. Only in receiving its current through the handle and in yielding it again through the opening is the vessel fully integrated into human teleology' (Simmel 1965a, 272). Teleology here seems to refer to the shaping of actions by *immanent* and *contrasting* forms

of constraint and facilitation of practical activity. Handles and spouts serve to provide a point of contact between the vessel and the external world, including the world of practical activity. Only the handle performs this ecological function 'centripetally', while the spout does this 'centrifugally' (Simmel 1965a, 272). Objects are organized such that they 'seize the totality of our energy by means of such particular faculties and enlist [them] into their service' (Simmel 1965a, 274). This enlisting is both sensory and spiritual, physical and psychic: 'By means of the sensitivity of the sense organs, the corporeal reaches us to the soul; by means of willed innervations, the soul reaches out into the corporeal world' (Simmel 1965a, 272).

Is this entirely convincing? In his book *Simmel and the Social*, Olli Pyyhtinen (2010, 38) notes how Simmel offers a relational model of the social which is 'constantly uncovering connections between objects' and which espouses the view that 'one cannot trace relations by being fixed in one position'. Pyyhtinen praises the way in which the 'various essays on culture' – which presumably include the kinds of reflections covered thus far in this chapter (i.e. 'Sociological Aesthetics', 'The Aesthetic Significance of the Face', 'The Picture Frame' and 'The Handle') – focus on the 'dynamism between objects and subjects' instead of framing objects as 'essentialized, external, and simply imposing their causal laws upon us' (Pyyhtinen 2010, 112). But he also picks up on some of the themes discussed earlier by suggesting that, from the vantage point of contemporary material culture and Actor-Network Theory, Simmel takes for granted what we mean by 'practical' and his analyses also assume an 'asymmetry' between the 'social' and the 'material':

> Simmel takes the use of objects as far too self-evident and given […] he treats uses only to the extent of making a contrast between applied arts (and other utility artifacts) and works of art. […] [Many] passages ignore the specific ways that things inscribe in our everyday lives and the energy, time, skill, and attention that their care and their handling require. […] Much more careful consideration is [also] needed on the specific ways of how things create potentials for our actions and increase our capabilities, affect us and move us both in place and to place, articulate our rationalities, politics, passions, and wills, participate in our world-making, and so on. With Simmel, there is always an *a priori asymmetry* between the capabilities of humans and nonhumans: only the human subject is endowed with the powers to generate and organize the world. (Pyyhtinen 2010, 129–30)

It is hard to deny that Simmel maintains a dualistic framework when it comes to the human and material world. It is also true that Simmel, while interested in the micrological analysis of everyday objects and experiences, provides no ethnographic or other empirical mapping of their usage. In many respects,

Simmel is a metaphysician of the micro, who sees what universalistic and transhistorical themes have to do with the nature of human soul, rather than someone who is attempting to micrologize (if I can use such an ugly word) for its own sake. However, in the context of how we re-animate context, I think it will pay to move on from the discussion of things like frames and handles to Simmel's meditations on landscape. As the translator of 'The Philosophy of Landscape' notes, this 'essay allows Simmel to bring a hitherto underexposed strand in his work concerning the oneness of humanity and nature within the all-pervading Life that continuously creates, sustains and reforms them' (Bleicher 2007, 20).

Landscape as Immersion in Material Context

That landscape may force a thinker to move beyond dualisms more fully is not entirely surprising. As John Wylie (2007, 2–11) has argued, landscape forces us to confront socially mediated 'tensions' such as the ones between 'proximity/distance', 'observation/inhabitation', 'eye/land' and, ultimately, 'culture/nature'. Or, as an ecologically minded anthropologist we will return to shortly puts it, landscape 'is not a totality that you or anyone else can look at, it is rather the world in which we stand […] [a] context of […] attentive involvement' (Ingold 2000, 207). I would add that it is precisely this 'context' of 'attentive involvement' that Simmel is aiming to explain in his essay on landscape; and that the arguments advanced there make Simmel's thoughts even more explicitly ecological or field/network oriented than his reflections on other material entities.

The starting point for 'The Philosophy of Landscape' is that, for something to constitute landscape, 'our consciousness has to acquire a wholeness, a unity, over and above its component elements, without being tied to their specificity or mechanistically composed of them' (Simmel 2007, 21). Varying degrees of attention to things like 'trees and water-courses, meadows and cornfields, hills and houses, and of the myriad changes in light and clouds' are not enough; landscape requires a 'boundary' or 'way of being' that can provide an all-encompassing 'field of vision' (Simmel 2007, 21). But, Simmel adds (2007, 21), field of vision is not meant to be taken literally, as the 'for-itself' status and type of 'unity' landscape demands 'may be optical, aesthetic or mood-centred'. The following striking analogy is offered to explain the type of 'sense-perceptual unity' at work: 'Whatever it is that we can take in through just one glance is not landscape or within our momentary field of vision is not landscape. […] In the same way a row of books placed next to each other does not by itself add up to a "library" ' (Simmel 2007, 23). Sense-perceptual unity is not, however, the imposition of a particular frame of mind or type of gaze

(as some recent landscape theory has termed it). Simmel (2007, 24) criticizes the view of empirical life which holds that landscape is a series of 'creations of mind' that are 'already in place' and that as our life 'proceeds' from segment to segment, 'on the 'basis of desire or goal', the segments are 'incorporated' into these pre-existing creations. Rather, landscape is like art – of which it is a 'proto-form' – in that it 'emerges out of Life […] and the extent to which life already contains [the] necessary formative powers' (Simmel 2007, 25). But what lies within us embryonically does not necessarily lead to the same outcomes. Simmel proposes, for example, that landscape affords us different types of creativity and imaginings than does the human figure:

> [W]e approach a landscape with a degree of objectivity, which cannot be as easily achieved with respect to another human being. […] In the case of the latter, we are constrained by subjective distractions such as a feeling of sympathy or antipathy […] and, above all, by one still largely unexamined presentiment of what this person could mean to us if he became a factor in our life. […] In our perception of landscape, we can group together its parts in this or that way; the emphasis between them can be shifted in many ways, or the relationship of centre and boundary. The human figuration […] determines all this out of itself. It has accomplished a synthesis around its own centre from within itself, and thereby demarcated itself unambiguously. (Simmel 2007, 26)

But just as there are different ways of capturing life via pictorial depictions of the human figure, there are different ways of apprehending the unity of nature. Thus, the sensory field of landscape differs from the concept of nature in the 'causally thinking scholar, the religious sentiments of a worshipper of nature, the teleologically oriented tiller of the soil, or a strategist of war' (Simmel 2007, 26). The uniqueness of the landscape mode of unifying the various elements and strands of nature consists in that most intangible of qualities: the *mood* of landscape. Indeed, Simmel (2007, 27) proposes that the centrality of mood to landscape (and vice versa) resolves one of the major epistemological problems that confronts discussion of material things: namely, 'whether our unitary perception of an object or the feeling arising with it comes first or second'. He asserts that there is 'no cause-and-effect relationship' between landscape and mood as both qualify equally as 'cause' and 'effect'; nor is there an 'inside' or 'outside' to the act of landscape perception, as emotional and spiritual ambience of place is a 'quality inherent in landscapes' (Simmel 2007, 27). Mood here is much more than whether a landscape is 'cheerful or serious, heroic or monotone, exciting or melancholic' (these are all emotional 'abstractions'). Rather, mood is the type of 'fusion' that the 'unifying powers' of the Soul can form 'in and through landscape' (Simmel 2007, 28).

Aesthetic Perception of Landscape: Simmel and Ecological Approaches Compared

Simmel's 'The Philosophy of Landscape' warrants comparison with ecological theories of the perception and aesthetics of landscape. Gibson's ecological theory of the kinds of perceptual affordances yielded by the physical environment has justifiably affected the field of landscape studies (Thompson 2013). It must also be said that this ecological approach is very *earthy* or *terrestrial* in nature. The landscape appears to Gibson (1979, 127–8) as 'surfaces of support' that offer different kinds of actions such as climbing, falling, hiding, walking, running, swimming and colliding with; and its 'substances' also offer the affordances of 'nutrition', 'manufacture' and 'manipulation'. The earth also lies 'beneath the attached and detached objects upon it' and, in a sense, could be said to possess 'furniture' and to be 'cluttered' (Gibson 1979,132). Landscape also affords 'openings' and 'obstacles', such as clearings in the forest or cliff-faces that offer no possibility of passage; and visual perception works with these surfaces to provide 'places that afford concealment, a *hiding place*' (Gibson 1979, 135). Gibson's landscapes contain invariants (e.g. if I turn my back to it, the landscape stays the same) but the interaction of surfaces and the way media interact with it (for e.g. the way that convex or concave hills and valleys capture and redirect light) provide for a relational and dynamic sense of landscape as context. Finally, landscape is not static in that place can be seen or 'scanned' from different vantage points (for e.g. an aerial photograph of the countryside is fundamentally different to a photo or painting of it from the ground); and as the organism moves the 'geographical environment' offers new points of perception which 'correspond to the set of all paths of locomotion' (Gibson 1966, 206). In short, perception is mobile as any shift in the eyes, head or overall orientation will produce a new sense of *ambience*; but also because *ambulatory* activity produces new vantage points from which to see, hear, touch and smell the environment.

Gibson's ecological approach has been extended in productive ways by Ingold in relationship to both landscape and to the activity of walking within it. The latter suggests that landscape is a 'qualitative and heterogeneous' phenomenon: imagine that you are 'standing outdoors, [landscape] is what you see all around: a contoured and textured surface replete with diverse objects – living and nonliving, natural and artificial' (Ingold 1993, 154). Echoing Simmel's (2007, 21) notion that '[f]or there to be landscape, our consciousness has to acquire a wholeness […] over and above its component elements', Ingold (1993, 154) writes that 'landscape is a plenum' in which 'there are no holes to be filled in'. Parallels between the two authors can also be seen with respect to how landscape is always to some extent bounded

yet also interwoven with a range of other things, and these, in turn, shape our consciousness of it:

> [A] place in the landscape is not 'cut off' from the whole, either on the plane of ideas or on that of material substance. Rather, each place embodies the whole at a particular nexus within it, and in this respect is different from every other. A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage. It is […] in the business of dwelling, that each place draws its unique significance. (Ingold 1993, 155)

As against the cartographer's notion of space which is static, and which measure the distances between fixed points, the dwelling perspective starts from the premise that 'actual journeys are made through a landscape' and that the meanings of place are '*gathered from*' rather than '*attached to*' the world we inhabit (Ingold 1993, 155). A form of dwelling of particular interest to Ingold is that of walking or moving through the landscape on 'foot'. Gibson's ecological psychology had already posited that flat and rigid surfaces are what afford walking; whereas, flat, non-rigid surfaces (a 'stream or lake') don't provide the necessary 'footing' and vertical drops are either barriers to locomotion or places that engender collisions and injuries. Again, we confront the simple fact that the surface of the earth is not homogenous. But Ingold is also interested in how landscape and walking are interwoven through the textures, rhythms and temporalities of the environment being perceived and inhabited. The 'Introduction' to *Ways of Walking* describes the co-determination of landscape and human movement: 'The surfaces on which inhabitants walk […] are neither flat nor homogeneous […] they are textured' (Ingold and Vergunst 2008, 7). They suggest materials such as gravel, cobblestone or asphalt tend to look unmarked by human walking but may, over a long period of time, erode or crack due to the elements; whereas, surfaces such as snow, sand and mud, 'being soft and malleable, are easily impressed' but such 'prints tend to be relatively ephemeral' (Ingold and Vergunst 2008, 8). Thus, the kinds of traces human locomotion leaves on the earth's surface have 'a temporal existence, a duration, which is bound to the very dynamics of the landscape to which they belong' (Ingold and Vergunst 2008, 8). The implications of this kind of thinking for studies of landscape are that places are themselves marked by time and by practical actions. Or, as Christopher Tilley (2004, 25) puts it in *The Materiality of Stone*, to understand landscape and its shaping powers on agents, a 'more holistic perspective is required, one that links bodies, movements and places into a whole'.

Do Simmel's reflections on landscape meet the requirements of such a holistic understanding? He seems to be heading in this direction when he states that '[W]e relate to landscape, whether in nature or art, as whole beings' (Simmel 2007, 29). But, to use the vernacular of Ingold and contemporary landscape studies, Simmel (2007, 29) seems to privilege one mode of dwelling above others, proclaiming that '[W]hile the rest of us remain more tied to [the] material [of landscape], and still tend to note only this or that separate part, only the artist really sees and creates "landscape".' Not only does this contradict other parts of the essay in question – for example, that the inseparability of mood and landscape is a general rather than specifically artistic type of experience – it advances an argument that the materiality of landscape is merely something to be transformed rather than something that never really relinquishes its structuring effects or affordances. Also, we might ask what would Simmel make of a work of art like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, in which 'the land itself, in terms of topography, atmosphere, geology, is a powerful, elemental and active agent, co-constructing the artwork' (Wylie 2007, 143)? Here we might turn to his essay 'The Ruin' to glean an account that takes the materiality of landscape much more seriously. Simmel (1965c, 260) suggests that a 'painting from which particles of paint have fallen off' is of a different order from the ruin of a building, in which a 'new whole, a characteristic unity' is produced 'out of what of art still lives', and from what of nature is emerging. We might therefore suggest that, in the case of the ruin, what produces the aesthetic effect – in a manner akin to that of *Spiral Jetty* – is that the 'same forces which give a mountain its shape through weathering, erosion, faulting, and the growth of vegetation, here do their work on old walls' (Simmel 1965a, 260). Or, couched in ecological terms, we might say that the very ground which afforded support to the construction and design of the building, and which may have provided the materials for its construction, is now producing a fusion of ruin and landscape: 'the ruin orders itself into the surrounding landscape without a break, growing together with it like tree and stone – whereas a palace, a villa, or a peasant house, even when they fit perfectly into the mood of the landscape, always stem from another order of things' (Simmel 1965c, 263). Simmel (1965c, 263) suggests that a building that has not yet undergone the process of ruination can 'blend with […] nature only as if in afterthought'.

Conclusion: Simmel and the Future of a Socio-Aesthetics

The governing assumption of this chapter has been that the social sciences badly require a new concept dealing with the phenomenon of context and that aesthetics, in its myriad of manifestations, may be able to lend a hand.

To put it in the language of the 'new sociology of art' (de la Fuente 2007), art and society, aesthetics and social life are not discrete and separated entities. They co-produce each other in ways that render the concept of context problematic. What we therefore need is a type of socio-aesthetics that can account for the sense of wholeness produced in and through specific aesthetic experiences and processes. My implicit argument has been that Simmel, with his multiple reflections on both everyday and rarefied aesthetic objects, provides a possible framework for thinking about context as the *aesthetic ecology of things*. The notion of an ecology has been used loosely here, a holding device if you like, for thinking about perception and environment, and how these fuse. We might say that, in Simmel's case, ecological relations can take the form of frames, handles and landscapes, where each of these represents a different type of unity and relationship between a self-organizing process and the flux that is Life itself. Frames remind us that we struggle to appreciate things without boundaries; but that boundaries also keep things at bay. Handles ask us to grasp, move, set down and generally use things; but never fully resolve (at least in Simmel's eyes) the tension between aspiring to be beautiful and needing to be useful. The landscape, by contrast, is a type of context where the dynamic tensions and processes that unite Life are on full display. We leave our marks on landscape but it also shapes us, nurtures us and encourages us to dwell in a range of ways. Landscape also invites us to experience things more holistically than the frame which demarcates and the handle which holds things together but – as is the case with *Coffeepot for Masochists* – is so dependent on design and manufacture for playing its role in the ecology of things. Simmel (2007, 29) contends that landscape reminds us that 'perception *and* feeling' are two sides of the same 'act' and aesthetic experience only 'gets split into these separated constituents through subsequent reflection'.

Why does the type of psychic and experiential wholeness provided by the aesthetic ecology of things matter? In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson (1973, 101) proposes that art is a type of reconciliation of the competing energies that are life itself: 'I argue that art is part of man's quest for grace; sometimes his ecstasy in partial success, sometimes his rage and agony at failure.' As Efraim Podoksik (2012, 10) notes, in several of his writings on aesthetic topics Simmel refers to situations which 'provoke the feeling that the very opposition between nature and mind has become void' and describes the 'unexplained feeling of unity' as a type of 'grace' or 'undeserved gift'. Whether one terms it 'grace', 'undeserved gift', 'fusion', 'flow' or 'transcendence', that feeling of mysterious unity – which is possible, but often less common, in the non-aesthetic dimensions of existence – is why the aesthetic ecology of things matters.

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