
ART RE-CALL:
RIVERSCAPES IN FLUX
REDEFINES ART AS LIFE

Elenita de la Rosa Garcia
Philosophy Department
De la Salle University
Manila, Philippines



The exhibit *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, a joint project of the Goethe Institut Philippines and the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, which opened on 14 March 2013 features the works of Southeast Asian artists focused on the changing riverscapes in the region. The Art Talk that followed on 16 March 2013 affirms the artists' general intention to document the changes in the environment brought about by technological advancements and globalization. The installations, addressing not only the sense of sight but of touch and smell among others, and expressly addressing socio-political issues are another set of artworks that defy the traditional idea of art, especially those exhibited in a museum. This paper explores the possibility that *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* embodies alternative aesthetics that Western philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger were looking for, as well as the Japanese aesthetics of *Wabi-Sabi*.

KEYWORDS: art, (alternative) aesthetics, Nietzsche, Heidegger, *Wabi-Sabi*

INTRODUCTION: THE AMBIVALENT POWER OF WATER

LAO ZI, REPUTED author of the manual for Daoism, the *Dao De Jing*, said that water is the element that symbolizes the Dao, the way of nature. It is the softest thing on earth, but because it is “humble” and “content” with the lowly places it tends to occupy, it is also the strongest. True enough, this element that always flows downward can put out fire, polish rocks and can—and have—caused great devastations in the history of humankind. Treat it well, the old sage seems to advise, and it will nurture you. Tamper with it, and it will drown you. Chapter 78 of the book says,

Nothing in the world
Is as soft and yielding as water.
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,
Nothing can surpass it.
The soft overcomes the hard;
The gentle overcome the rigid.
Everyone knows this is true,
But few can put it into practice...

Goethe Institut-Philippines, together with the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, opened *Riverscapes: IN FLUX—An Exhibit on Southeast Asian Rivers as Sites of Life and Strife* on 14 March 2013. The exhibit’s Art Talk that followed on 16 March 2013 featured some of the participating artists and curators who spoke about their respective works and their insights on the life of the water body they focused their projects on.

Common among their narratives is their having to deal with the dual nature of water as a nurturing, yet a destructive force as well. Centering on water bodies significant to their lives, each one portrays the light and dark sides of their respective rivers, recalling times past when they flowed high, free and clean, and nourished the people who nestled around them with fish and other natural wonders, while presenting its lamentable state now, after pollution, flooding and semi-drought. The artists each refer one way or another to connections, not just between people and the environment but also the connections within one’s own being. They also touch on connections between people in the past and people in the here and now, even as they hope that their work will

reach out to the people in the future. They each strive to retrieve memories through their artwork, as they attempt to make others remember, and continue to remember, what has been—good or bad—because each memory is a piece of life, significant and vital to the future of all.

Thus, as the artists lament what is no more and surround their work with the aura of nostalgia, they too hope that the seeds they have planted through them will someday come into fruition as they—with the connections these works afford them—forge new ways of seeing the world, constantly presenting questions, problematizing about the “good” of modernization and globalization, pitting image after image of the not-so-good consequences that these have brought about.

THE ARTWORKS: SENSORY PLAY, MEMORIES, STORIES

Filipino artist-curator Chitz Ramirez introduces the works from the Philippines and describes the exhibit as addressing “sight, smell and sound.” They are, he says, an attempt to call people’s attention—even those who are not initially looking—to what is happening around, hoping that they, too, would take some action in order to alleviate the suffering. This intention, it turns out, is true not just of the pieces from the Philippines but of all pieces in *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*.

Goldie Poblador, creating a perfume bar (Figure 1) of Marikina River’s scent at different times, olfactorily chronicling the life

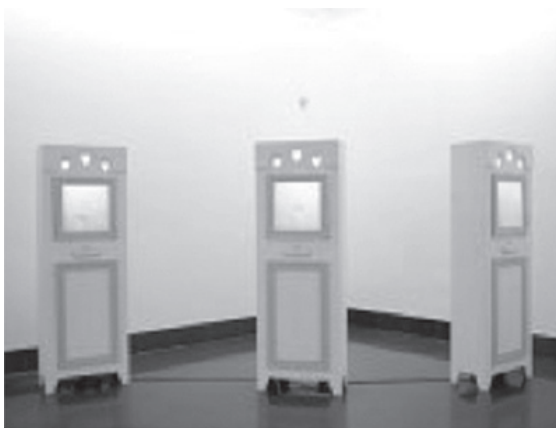


FIGURE 1. Goldie Poblador’s *Perfume Bar*¹



FIGURE 2. Jon Romero's
Sound Bridge

of the river from its murky past during the flooding of 2009 to its clearer present, connects the sense of smell with memories, saying that numerous stories could be told just by having a scent of something. Her beautiful hand-blown glass perfume bottles, displayed in light cabinets, carry on their stoppers the shapes of plants newly springing around the Marikina River after the 2009. Like the smells she gathers and hopes to spur the impulse to tell remembered stories, these bottles and their light cabinet also make one remember traditional crafts that are fast becoming passé because of commercially produced ones. But more importantly, they are also a kind of cheerful prayer for the garden she envisions to have around her community along the Marikina River, which would signify a healing of the devastation in the past.

Jon Romero's "Sound Bridge" (Figure 2) does not just connect impersonal physical structures but also nature and people, as the waterways and steel pipe railing invite people to touch, not just what is around them but touch other people as well. These create personal and non-tangible webs that give rise to childlike curiosity, wonder and joy, as high pitched vibrations sound off when people decide to connect in this manner through Jon's installation.

Som Sutthirat Supaparinya of Thailand, on the other hand, captures the genuine feeling of loss with her video installation, "My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked," relating what to her, when she was a child, was a mysterious life of her grandfather who worked by the Ping River, managing the timber transport of teakwood from Chiang Mai to Bangkok. Her work shows the many (radical) changes in the river since her grandfather's time



FIGURE 3. Nguyen The Son's Mountain Links with Mountain, River Links with River

and how their experiences of the riverscape are different because of the rise of the dams around it. In spite of this, however, she says she has taken an interest in water as a power source in her desire to understand the many transformations of the Ping River.

Another cry of nostalgia is in the work of Vietnamese Nguyen The Son, "Mountain Links with Mountain, River Links with River" (Figure 3). The title is part of the lyrics of a traditional friendship song between China and Vietnam which share the Red River. His Vietnamese calligraphy of these words, done in relief, that hang atop the photographic chronicle of the Red River's deterioration provide a stark contrast between the clean elegance of the past and the images of the polluted state of the river at present.

Tran Luong, an artist-curator who is also from Vietnam speaks of his art projects, aimed at giving voice to underprivileged island people in Vietnam. He, together with kindred artists and cultural workers, encourage these people to draw and paint, since their writing capabilities have been limited by their situation—impoverished and far too removed from the mainland to be in the sphere of the government's consciousness. In this way, Tran Luong believes that the people can express better ("a picture paints a thousand words") than with written words, their issues about the sea that surrounds them. On the one hand, he relates, the sea is their nurturing mother, but on the other hand it has also become the waste bin of their unmindful living habits.

Of the other artists not present in the Art Talk, their respective works speak silent speeches, addressing the same issues that affect the rivers in Southeast Asia. The loudest of these non-verbal messages is perhaps Vietnamese Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's "The

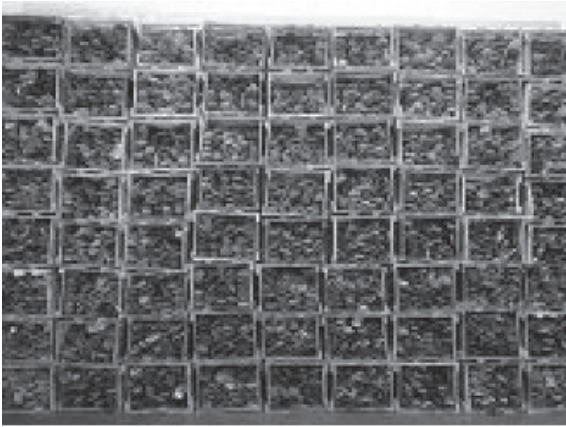


FIGURE 4. Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's *The Vestiges*

Vestiges" (Figure 4). Sixty wooden crates that are piled up high, filled with remnants rubber and plastic slippers, worn out, carried away by the flood, each of them in turn carrying memories of a life, lost or deeply affected by catastrophes.² Each slipper, without a pair, can trace an invisible map back to a life and a whole story.

Jedsada Tangtrakulwong's "Chi River" uses a basket weaving technique, to make traditional fish traps resembling fishes or boats themselves, suspended on lines from the ceiling, that give the illusion of fish swimming underwater or boats floating on water. He aims to present the fishermen's way of life as fluid as these "swimming fish traps," transforming in its culture as the river on which their livelihood depends also undergoes changes.

Than Sok of Cambodia does the same for the farmer's way of life. His ten scarecrows (straw figures) called *dtingmul* (Figure 5) are reminiscent of the crops farmers tried to protect from animals in the past. But the 2011 flooding of the river left the farmers without crops to protect and the *dtingmul* is left standing, lonely and useless in the middle of the field.

Also from Cambodia, Vuth Lyno represents the life of the Tonle Sap River communities, with their modular houses on stilts that allow the inhabitants to escape the flooding each time the river rises. The 2011 flooding, though not a natural rise in the river, allowed them more leeway than others in coping with the changes in the ecological system. The people's devotion to Neak Ta, guardian of the forest and the river, may also have kept them more open to changing their lives, going with the flow of the river. Lyno's "Rise and Fall" is a soundscape that plays the life of the people around the river, with the sound of "fishing, storytelling,



FIGURE 5. Than Sok's
Middleground



FIGURE 6. Wok the
Rock's *Bandar Raya Snack*

and ceremonial practices for the river spirits."³

Indonesian Wok the Rock (Woto Wibowo) created a snack kiosk of sucker fish (janitor fish) crackers (Figure 6) that symbolize the social status of the impoverished people living along the riverside. The sucker fish is considered inedible by the middle and upper class people, but here they are fished and cooked "as food of desperate measures."⁴

Myanmar's Aung Ko features painted cloth boats and wooden toy ones as an homage to the boats, significant in the Irrawaddy river along which his village thrives, aware of the changes in the river. The boat, he says, "[confirms] the river as a place of transportation ... and as a livelihood, providing fish."⁵ The toys are handmade boats that the people, especially the children, create because commercially manufactured ones are not available to them.

Such are the issues that *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* raises. As curator and art critic, Iola Lenzi says:

Major waterways [in Southeast Asia] ... are therefore sites of contestation, simultaneously claimed by partisans of development and conservation. Thus...[it] embodies struggle between modernity and tradition. Changing relationships to water also feed international tension as the different countries sharing it spar over control and resources. Global as it is, environmental stress is particularly acute in Southeast Asia where civil society is nascent and individuals and communities often have little say in government decisions...

....

Through art and the river-as-symbol, *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* tackles one of the most future-defining stresses of this generation, the quest for balance between economic needs and environment conservation. Whichever is responsible, a disregard born of social change, or an inability to control the river's fate, there is no doubting that the river, once ally and source of livelihood, is now a site of strife. The *FLUX* works, questioning rather than stating, sometimes poetic despite their dark stance, enlarge the project's ecological framework to offer intersecting perspective on the complexities of Southeast Asia today.⁶

The art purist raises an eyebrow at these words and incredulous, asks, "Art 'questioning'?" "Art reflecting the 'local'? A people's struggle?" Once again, the traditional concept of art is nudged and poked at as *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* puts canonical aestheticism in question.

However, amidst this art purism, there are thinkers in the early Western philosophical tradition who sought to stray to the sidelines and redefine the location of art in the dynamism of life.

HEIDEGGER AND NIETZSCHE ON AESTHETICS

The ontologist (turned existentialist) Martin Heidegger (1889-

1976), agreeing with Hegel (1770-1831) in declaring that great art has been dead for a long time, looks to Ancient Greece for inspiration in his attempt to rediscover art as *techne*, which is the fusion of knowledge (*episteme*) and skill. Art and crafts, therefore, were one and the same, not only for the ancient Greek artisan but also for the Medieval artists and craftspeople who worked “side by side on primitive scaffolding...”⁷ This fusion disintegrated, according to Heidegger, with the development of aesthetics during the Renaissance period that led to the separation between art that is “merely for looking” and crafts that usually serve a function in daily life. The ancient Greek, says Heidegger, had no use for aesthetics as their art was “lived”⁸ and as such, it was always a collective work that resulted in a state of *rapture*,

... a state of feeling explodes the very subjectivity of the subject. By having a feeling for beauty the subject has already come out of himself...⁹

....

Art belongs to a realm where we find ourselves—we are the very realm...Art does not belong...to what is well known to us, art is the most familiar...it is actual is the rapture of *embodying life*.¹⁰ (emphasis supplied)

Heidegger, writing on Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), cannot but agree with the latter’s claim that art is redemptive. In the foreword to *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), Nietzsche says that “art is the highest task and the proper metaphysical activity of this life,” and not merely “a merry diversion.”¹¹ The whole essay that follows centers on Greek tragedy as the highest form of art that saves us from the Schopenhauerian¹² view of life as suffering. Nietzsche claims that Greek tragedy was born out of the dialectic, and eventually, a balance between the opposing influences of Apollo, the god of light and beauty, and Dionysos,¹³ the god that roams the dark earth, chaotic forests and incites frenzy and drunkenness in his followers, the Maenads. As Dionysos holds the truth of life and suffering, Apollo covers it with a veil of illusion, of beauty and brightness, that makes it bearable for us to live it a span of time longer. The artist who fuses these two influences¹⁴

... feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy...he is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art; in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself as the highest gratification of the Primordial Unity.¹⁵

Just as Heidegger refers to the disappearance of the dichotomy between subject and object in rapture, here Nietzsche points to the loss of *principium individuationis* that separates the subject (artist) from the object (work of art) that sends back the artist to the original oneness with others and with Nature in the state of *ecstasy*.¹⁶ In Greek tragedy, this is represented by the chorus¹⁷—several individuals that spoke as one—which was the core of the original drama now lost. It is the chorus that embodied the Primordial Unity that dissolved individuality. The loss of this part of the tragic art, and the eventual loss of the real tragic drama, Nietzsche blames on too much theorizing on the part of the philosophers, as popularized by no less than Socrates¹⁸ and Plato just as, again, Heidegger blames too much aestheticism for the loss of great art in the modern times.

The urgency with which both Heidegger and Nietzsche call to their respective audiences for the rebirth of real art is born out of the separation between art and life. For both thinkers, art was appropriated by *thinkers* and was trapped in the realm of the mind, thus losing its connection with life, which in turn, lost its enchantment, or what Nietzsche calls drunkenness.

Heidegger in his pursuit of a revelation of Being writes,

[A]rt is the opening up of the Being of beings. We must provide a new content for the word “art” and for what it intends to name, on the basis of a fundamental orientation to Being that has been won back in an originary way.¹⁹

Heidegger saw in the poet (specifically Holderlin) the one who would lead us on the path toward the revelation of Being, one who is “always on the lookout for signs of the return of the festival.”²⁰ Heidegger says that the poet can help us *dwell* poetically. It is significant that he uses the word “*dwell*” rather than just “*live*.” We have to remember that Heidegger’s model of everything “originary” is Ancient Greece where (and when) art was *lived* in an environment enchanted by the mythical consciousness, which

sought the unity of all aspects of life. "Living," therefore, does not capture the meaning of "dwelling," which involves finding a space in which to build a house and care for it and its surroundings. It is, for Heidegger, a way of living that *cares* (Sorge) and through which one is also taken care of. Art, for Heidegger, must be able to do this for us.

For some reason, both Nietzsche and Heidegger, perhaps biased for their love of everything Greek,²¹ did not turn their eyes to the East for an alternative aesthetics, in spite of their critique of the way art has progressed (or regressed) in the Western scene. If the East rarely, if at all, allowed the mind to go its own path outside the realm of actually lived life, it is also unlikely that Eastern aesthetics would remove art from life.

WABI-SABI AESTHETICS

Wabi-sabi is a term that has lately become iconic in Japan, referring to things that are natural and simple, untouched by technology or commercial manipulation. The character for "wabi" points to something that is "empty" and "lonely," like when a person feels these emotions inside of her, while the character for "sabi" refers, on the other hand, to things that are worn out or decayed, like when an object that has been used or suffered weathering appears old and imperfect.²² The term *wabi-sabi* then reflects the unpolished, incomplete and imperfect, and is expression of an aspect of Japanese culture.²³

Deriving influences from the Buddhist tradition that has been transformed by Daoism in China and has become Zen in Japan, *wabi-sabi* speaks of a whole philosophy that forms its own unique aesthetics.

Buddhism, as founded by Siddhartha Gautama (c. 500 BCE) in Nepal, rests on the simple truth that people suffer because of our inability to accept that life is constantly changing. Everything is impermanent and yet, we cling to that which is temporary, desiring for it to last forever. Since this cannot and will not be, we suffer disappointments, frustrations, and fears, due to attachment. The cure, therefore, is the practice of detachment.

This virtue of detachment (in the sense of letting go or letting be, rather than apathy) is amplified in the Daoist prescribed *wei-wu-wei* or "doing-without-doing" or simply, "no-doing." Now

this is very different from “not doing anything.” “No-doing” is still active, yet it advocates the *right* amount of activity, nothing more, nothing less. This is because too much or too little activity will only lead to the opposite of one’s intended effect.

Everything, it says in the *Dao De Jing*, is constantly changing from *yin* (negative) to *yang* (positive) and back again. So dualistic thinking, which makes one cling to the positive, will not work and will only lead to suffering. Since the *yin* and the *yang* constantly shift, round and round, things only go by *reversal*. Any attempt to prolong the positive will inevitably lead to the negative. Thus, *wei-wu-wei*, the virtue of letting things be, of “no-doing.” Chapter 63 of the book says,

Act without doing;
Work without effort.
Think of the small as large
And the few as many.

Confront the difficult
While it is still easy.
Accomplish the great task
By a series of small acts.

The master never reaches for the great,
Thus she achieves greatness.
When she runs into a difficulty
She stops and gives herself to it.
She doesn’t cling to her own comfort,
Thus problems are no problems for her.

Combining these virtues from Buddhism and Daoism, Zen Buddhism, the Japanese form of Buddhism, has influenced *wabi-sabi* worldview. *Wabi-sabi* keeps to things that are closest to nature, as these are the things one could take after in practicing the virtue of “no-doing,” realizing that nothing in the world is permanent and that supreme wisdom lies in the following of the Dao. Andrew Juniper in *Wabi-sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence* (2003) lists eight principles of *wabi-sabi* aesthetics. Anything *wabi-sabi* is organic, free of form, rich in texture, plays between beauty and ugliness, muted in color, simple, mindful of space, and sober (as in calm and without illusions).

Juniper explains that to reflect impermanence and the continuous evolution from and devolution into nothingness,²⁴ which is the metaphysical foundation of Zen, *wabi-sabi* art uses only organic materials found in nature. Interesting and unique form—although hardly perfect or symmetrical as nature is often chaotic—is already inherent in them and need no imposition from the artist. They are rich in texture, left unpolished as they are. Being so, they are what mainstream ideas of beauty might describe as “ugly.” *Wabi-sabi* gets out of this opposition and shows that “the two [concepts] are one and the same and only divided by learned perceptions.”²⁵

Speaking of “learned perceptions,” the potter and craft aesthete Soetsu Yanagi (1889- 1961), championing the cause of folk or vernacular crafts, says of beauty, capturing the essence of *wabi-sabi*,

To “see” is to go direct to the core, to know the facts about an object of beauty is to go around the periphery. Intellectual discrimination is less essential to an understanding of beauty than the power of intuition that precedes it.²⁶

The colors of *wabi-sabi* art are also subdued, dark or gray but carrying the warmth of earth colors. All in all *wabi-sabi* art keeps to the simple and the basic. This way, it can emphasize space in the sense of being attuned to its surroundings so that it *blends* rather than stand out from its background or the place in which it is positioned. This way, *wabi-sabi* art becomes that way through which one remains aware that life is continuously shifting and becomes mindful of its real nature as impermanence. Lacking ostentation and keeping to the humble and ordinary, it avoids attachment. This is true Zen sobriety.²⁷

The principles of *wabi-sabi* aesthetics therefore show art to be relational. Unlike mainstream ideas of art, it does not aim to make an artwork assert itself against the world but rather consider the world in which the artwork lies. This is the meaning of art arising out of life and keeping in touch with life. Is this not, therefore, what Heidegger calls *dwelling*? Is this not also aligned to spirit of Nietzsche’s Primordial Unity?



FIGURE 7. *Wabi-sabi* tea bowl, image taken from Mark Smalley's *Earth Work*.²⁸

IN FLUX: ART AS LIFE

Describing art as a communal activity in the olden times, Heidegger writes that it is

... the *dissolution* of everything solid into a *fluid*, flexible, malleable state, into a *swimming* and *floundering*; the unmeasured, *without laws or borders, clarity or definiteness*; the boundless night of sheer *submergence*. In other words, art is once again to become an *absolute need*.²⁹ (emphasis supplied)

Heidegger has described art in adjectives that fit the description of water. Water, after all, is life, and that is what *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* tells us, as if responding to Heidegger's call for art as an *absolute need*. The exhibit embodies the alternative aesthetics that he, together with Nietzsche, and *wabi-sabi* principles seek:

1. the (re)union of art with life;
2. the dissolution of the artist as a subject and into Primordial Unity (that is, connections "between man and man"[*sic*] and "between man [*sic*] and Nature"³⁰ or the re-placement of art in the life of the community);
3. the use of natural materials for an ecological, environment-caring work of art; and
4. the redemptive value of art (Nietzsche's view of art as a way of bearing with the otherwise terrible life; the revelation of Being as a dwelling, for Heidegger; and the principle of sobriety—understanding the nature of reality

as impermanence—for *wabi-sabi*).

Art and life

Riverscapes: IN FLUX's installations are far from the traditional art exhibits in that they are not "merely for looking." The art projects, as mentioned previously, almost always evoke various sensible experiences and insights. All the artists reveal of having lived in the community from which they derived their inspiration for their artwork, making all their projects arise out of their lived experience. As a result, these works are reminiscent of crafts that are made and used by the members of the communities in which they have immersed themselves. Examples are Jedsada Tangtrakulwong's traditional fish traps, Than Sok's straw people, Vuth Lyno's miniature stilted house, Wok the Rock's fish crackers and Aung Ko's painted cloth boats and wooden toy boats. The wooden crates in Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's "The Vestiges," are also part of crafts, apart from the innumerable lives the collected slippers signify.

Artists also derived inspirations from their own place of dwelling, literally, as in Than Sok's "Middle Ground" and Goldie Poblador's "The Fragrance of the Marikina River," or metaphorically, as in Som Sutthirat Supaparinya's "My Granpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked," requiring her to re-live her grandparents' life along the Ping River.

All the artists, however, project these artworks from an actual lived experience of the changes in their respective riverscapes. All of them responded with creativity to the issues arising from globalization and technological advancement³¹ that raise dams and factories that block or pollute the rivers.

From Dichotomy to Unity

In the process of immersion within the riverside community for the making of their artwork, the artists cannot anymore lay sole claim to the creation of their art. Unlike ivory-tower artists who each creates as a solitary individual, the artists of *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* openly declare that their work arose either out of their life in the community and therefore was created with the people as source and background of the work, or out of the combined efforts of the members of the community, for the artist could not

have done the work alone. Wok the Rock for instance, writes:

This project surveys sucker fish under social, cultural and economical aspects. I researched about dishes that include sucker fish *created by people living along the riverside*, its nutritional value and also how it is traded. The result of the research is an installation of a food hawker kiosk selling sucker fish products, complete with brochures and video. *The project involved chefs and students of nutritional and food sciences.*³² (emphasis supplied)

Similarly, Cambodian Sim Sokchanlina relating his experience through his photographs entitled “Rising Tonle Sap” writes:

I took numerous trips up and down the Tonle Sap, and stayed at select sites with families for many days at a time....

... the quiet and fantastical photographs were staged *with the great help from the community in each location.*³³ (emphasis supplied)

In “Mountain Links with Mountain, River Links with River,” too, Nguyen The Son invokes the “people’s memories and imagination of the Red River”³⁴ still reaching out to the unities that transcend the boundaries of the individual beyond space and time.

Materials from Nature

It is easy to glean the *wabi-sabi* principle of using organic materials in the works involving people’s traditional crafts. In addition to those previously mentioned, this is evident in Jon Romero’s “Sound Bridge” and Goldie Poblador’s perfumes, bottles and light cabinets, even in Anothai Nitibhon’s “Loi Krathong” (water as video screen) and Pan Thao Nguyen’s “Mekong Mechanical” (parchment paper and cardboard album). However, this becomes problematic—albeit, surely philosophically productive if discussed—in video, sound and photographic installations.

In the sense that the object of the sound, video and photographic installations are elements of nature, perhaps, these works may still be considered to comply with the principle of being organic.

Yet, it is relevant to ask which exactly is the work of art: the river, for instance, taken from the artist's point of view? Or the video recording of the river?³⁵ This question requires contemplation and will no doubt bring about various aspect of art that are relevant to the study of alternative aesthetics. For the purposes of this inquiry, however, it is sufficient to bring to the fore that all the artworks address the issue of the environment as an organic whole, transforming and affecting their surrounding landscapes and architecture.

Art as Savior

It is true that these works, to the mainstream spectator, may seem strange and a far cry from those traditionally exhibited in museums. But that kind of art is, to use Nietzsche's terminology, merely Apollonian—invoking the dream state of the beautiful, hiding the terror that lies beneath, the darkness that is the foundation of existence. In Zen terms, it is merely illusory, a poor attempt at hiding the truth of *emptiness*.

These works, on the other hand, are truly tragic in Nietzschean context because they are able to show the harsh reality that is happening to the environment and how lives are adversely affected, made more terrible, by these phenomena. That these works confront the truth so that someone might pay attention and be encouraged to act and make the change in order to even just slow down the devastation, may be the redemptive value in them.

Heidegger speaks of art as a revelation of truth and of Being. In *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, the works disclose new realities about rivers in Southeast Asia. They present new ways of coping, of living, and therefore, of *dwelling*. This process is vividly captured in Mahardika Yudha's "Shifting Live Objects into Inanimate," a found-object and video installation that portray the change "due to a shift in urban and social structures" Yudha adds:

While people in the south can still take advantage of the river's natural wealth, catching fish and mollusks, or hunting for lizards, the situation is different for people living downriver in West Jakarta. Because of the bad water quality, the people here have changed their profession and are collecting metal and plastic waste...

....

This project tries to convey the ecological change of Angke river in relation to rural, suburban and urban areas by mapping the different professions connected to the river...³⁶

Just like this, the *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* artworks all show the transformations, usually for the worse, of the various rivers in question. For these works to serve as reminders of the fleeting nature of things and of life itself, is this not the sobriety that Wabi-Sabi aesthetics prefers? In which case, in presenting failure and destruction, it also saves by the warning it gives, forcing people to cope with the changing environment by also changing their lifestyles.

CONCLUSION: RIVERSCAPES: IN FLUX RE-CALLS ART BACK TO LIFE

Chitz Ramirez describes the exhibited works as a kind of *call*. It is a kind of hailing to whoever will pay attention to join in the project, to find more connections that may one day lead to the change necessary for us to save the environment. It is a fitting description. Adding the prefix “re” to the word “call” allows for a play of words that enrich Chitz Ramirez’ insight about *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*. A “recall” is a remembering, as most of the works enjoys the spectators to remember different things: how the river used to be pristine, how the floods demolished homes and shattered lives, how to connect once again, how to hope. A “re-call” is also a repetitive calling. A persistent crying out to someone, to many, that the environment needs our help and that we need help. And most relevant to our discussion is the use of “re-call” to mean the calling of art back into life.

Heidegger in “The Origin of Art,” speaks of Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of old peasant boots. He says that the boots, after deep consideration, ceases, for the spectator, to be mere boots. They begin to portray a whole life of toil, a farmer’s life—laboriously physical, and dirty, as signified by the boots’ worn out state and the packs of mud that still cling to them. Heidegger says that in this way, “the artwork lets us know what shoes are in truth,” thereby contributing to the unconcealment or disclosure

(*aleitheia*) of Being.³⁷

As the works in *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* remains faithful in their portrayal of the disintegration of rivers, perhaps, they too will one day reveal to their spectators what rivers truly are.

POST-SCRIPT: MUSEUM AS A PLACE OF DWELLING

In the open forum during the Art Talk at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, the director, Sandra Palomar, spoke of how the museum is also changing as the way art is conceived and created changes. Taking as an example Jon Romero's "Sound Bridge" that required water to pool on the floor, the museum, she explained, took risks and found ways to extend the parameters of art exhibition in order to accommodate its elements. This may be, to most, quite unconventional. But in this case, it became part and parcel of the kind of exhibit in place.

This brings to mind Soetsu Yanagi's project of creating a folk-art museum³⁸ based on the guilds, to exhibit artisans' craftworks. The museum, for Yanagi, is simply too removed from life and therefore alienates crafts which, by definition, are created within and for use in life.

In the case of *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, the museum has proved that it can open its space to non-traditional art and allow engagements such as those the artworks invoke. In a sense, it has brought what is "outside," inside and thus might be said to have embodied Heidegger's *dwelling*. Given this, it might also be possible that the museum, as a closed space, is redefined and becomes an open space—a space *outside*, thereby bringing what is (used to be) inside, out there. The world-space therefore becomes the museum and art never ever has to be removed from life again.

There is so much to be discussed regarding the museum as a space of *dwelling*, in addition to the many unanswered (and unasked) questions this essay has hopefully evoked. It is hoped that insight-generating critical discussions continue as art and life are both redefined in relation to one another.

NOTES

¹ All pictures of *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* artworks are taken from Goethe Institut's *Riverscapes: IN FLUX* blog gallery, at <http://blog.goethe.de/riverscapes/pages/>

gallery.html

² It calls to mind the thousands of shoes, children's and adults', that lie on top of one another in a hollowed floor covered with a see-through panel, in one of the galleries of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. For one who loves footwear, this was an emotionally jarring image. "The Vestiges" is the same, even worse for the closeness of its context.)

³ Vuth Lyno, "Rise and Fall," *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, Vietnam: Goethe Institut, 2012, 45.

⁴ Woto Wibowo, "Banda Raya Snack," *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, Vietnam: Goethe Institut, 2012, 55.

⁵ Aung Ko, "The Sights Viewed from Boats," *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, Vietnam: Goethe Institut, 2012, 59.

⁶ Iola Lenzi, "Riverscapes In Flux, Southeast Asian Rivers as Sites of Life and Strife," *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, Vietnam: Goethe Institut, 2012, 17.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche (Volumes I and II)*. Translated by David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper SanFrancisco, 1991, 81.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Translated by Clifton P. Fadiman. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995, iv.

¹² Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), knowledgeable in Buddhism, declared that life is suffering. However, whereas the Buddha taught about the elimination of suffering, Schopenhauer denied that there can be any escape from it. This is because Schopenhauer attributes everything to the Will, which in the individual is manifested as desire, the will-to-live. One can only temporarily fight this through, interestingly enough, the contemplation of art or through asceticism. These are forms of saying "no" to the will-to-live, albeit all short-lived, because eventually, the Will prevails. Thus, Schopenhauer's pessimism. Nietzsche, a fan of Schopenhauer in the beginning turns this around and says we should, instead, say "yes" to this Will and transform it into a will-to-power.

¹³ Dionysos is not an Olympian god and Nietzsche acknowledges that he has been imported "from the East." Considered in Greek mythology to be a "twice-born" god, having been rescued by his father Zeus when his mother Semele, pregnant with him, asked to see the god of Thunder in his true form, and when the Titans abducted, cut him up and cooked him. By virtue of these, Dionysos is known as the god of death and rebirth and has associations with the Eleusinian Mysteries that centered on the theme of descending to and ascending from the

Underworld. The Dionysia is held in his honor, the dithyramb a poetic measure invented specifically for him. It was in the Dionysias that poets are called to give their best tetralogy, composed of three tragedies and one satyr. Thus, Nietzsche's penchant for the Dionysian spirit and his identification of Greek tragedy with this god.

¹⁴ In spite of Nietzsche's insistence that art is born out of the balance between the influences of Dionysos and Apollo, it is obvious that he really clings to the Dionysian part and his arguments in *The Birth of Tragedy* becomes confused as he tries to go back to this claim of balance. According to Aaron Ridley (in *Nietzsche on Art*, New York, 2007), in his later works, especially in *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche would refer to "yes-saying" to life as definitely "Dionysian."

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Identified with Dionysian drunkenness, a mass consciousness often felt while being in a crowd that shares one objective, as what happens to the audience in a stadium rooting for their team to win—complete stranger high-fiving or hugging when their team scores points. These are behavior that a sober individual, conscious of himself or herself as a lone individual, will not do.

¹⁷ It is said that the term has origins in "tragoidia" that means "he-goat-song" and that is why the original chorus were satyrs, wearing goat skins as costume. In the third chapter of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche recounts the satyr Silenus telling Midas of the tragic existence of the human beings. In Greek mythology, satyrs are half-man, half-goat creatures who also dwell in the forests and have close affinities with nature, a fitting symbol for Nietzsche's Primordial Unity.

¹⁸ Nietzsche claims that Euripides killed tragedy by injecting into it the philosophizing individual. Euripides was a friend to Socrates and therefore was heavily influenced by the latter. Nietzsche has only disdain for the "Socratic aesthete" or the "theorizing man" who, according to him, killed action.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, 140.

²⁰ Julian Young. *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 117.

²¹ One might add, "Dionysian" festival.

²² Taro Gold. *Living Wabi-sabi*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2004, 19.

²³ Leonard Koren, *Wabi-sabi: For Artists, Designers, Poets, and philosophers*. Point Reyes, California: Imperfect Publishing, 2008, 15.

²⁴ "Nothingness" or "emptiness" are not negative terms in Zen Buddhism. If anything, it is a denial of dualistic thinking that remains on the level of concepts, which in the end, proves as illusory as sensible experience. Contemplation on

“nothingness” or “emptiness” brings one to the realization that nothing exists on its own and all ideas serve only to differentiate and therefore, create an opposition. A phenomenon’s “positive” or “negative” value is not inherent in it but is defined only by the circumstances surrounding it. Attachment to dualistic thinking or dichotomous mind leads to negative emotions like avoidance, frustrations, fears, etc. In short, it leads to suffering.

²⁵ Andrew Juniper, *Wabi-sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2003, 110.

²⁶ Soetsu, Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*. Adapted by Bernard Leach. New York: Kondansha International, 1981, 110.

²⁷ See Andrew Juniper, *Wabi-sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2003.

²⁸ Tea bowl image taken from Mark Smalley’s *Earth Work*, posted on 10 September 2011, at http://earthwork7.blogspot.com/2011_09_01_archive.html

²⁹ Martin Heidegger. *Nietzsche (Volumes I and II)*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1991, 87.

³⁰ These are Nietzsche’s phrases describing the Primordial Unity. See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Clifton P. Fadiman. New York: Dover Publications, 1995.

³¹ Heidegger, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (translated by William Lovitt, 1977), explains that the totalizing effects of modern technology does not require us to go back to the idyllic past, discarding all that science has worked for thus far. Besides, this would be impossible, since the desire to solve the problem of technology is itself technological. We must, he advises, approach this question with openness and releasement or a “letting go” because in the end, the technological is another way of revealing and therefore understanding Being. In this, Heidegger truly sounds Daoist.

³² Woto Wiboto, *op. cit.*

³³ Sim Sokchanlina, “Rising Tonle Sap,” *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, Vietnam: Goethe Institut, 2012, 41.

³⁴ Nguyen The Son, “Mountain Links with Mountain, River Links with River,” *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, Vietnam: Goethe Institut, 2012, 29.

³⁵ Ms. Sandra Palomar, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, brought up precisely this question in an informal gathering immediately following the Art Talk. Again, at this point, Heidegger’s inquiry into the nature of technology may come in handy, although it is not likely to bring absolute answers. Whichever the case may be, this particular issue in aesthetics is a rich source of insights and further questionings.

³⁶ Mahardika Yudha, "Shifting Live Objects into Inanimate," *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*, Vietnam: Goethe Institut, 2012, 53.

³⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Perennial Classics, 2001, 35.

³⁸ Yanagi, *op. cit.*, 105.

References Cited

"Art Talk: Southeast Asian Artists on *Riverscapes: IN FLUX*." Tall Gallery, Metropolitan Museum of Manila, 16 March 2013.

Gold, Taro. *Living Wabi-sabi*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2004.

Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt, 1977.

_____. *Nietzsche (Volumes I and II)*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1991.

_____. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

_____. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Perennial Classics, 2001.

Juniper, Andrew. *Wabi-sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2003.

Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi: For Artists, Designers, Poets, and Philosophers*. Point Reyes, California: Imperfect Publishing, 2008.

Mitchell, Stephen. *Tao Te Ching: A New English Translation*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Clifton P. Fadiman. New York: Dover Publications, 1995.

Ridley, Aaron. *Nietzsche on Art*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Riverscapes: IN FLUX. Vietnam: Goethe Institut, 2012.

Yanagi, Soetsu. *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight Into Beauty*. Adapted by Bernard Leach. New York: Kondansha International, 1981.

Young, Julian. *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.