

This is my reply to your question 'what is an artifact?' My answer begins as an entry in my digital diary, called 'from a garden':

http://www.softopia.demon.co.uk/2.2/digital_diary/06.01.04.html

online: 14 january 2006
modified: 12, 13 january 2006

4 january 2006 **from a garden**

11:54 I am siting beneath a sheltering roof in an ornamental garden on a sunny day in winter... and looking at a small forest of bamboos - too thick to enter... the bamboos, which have not shed their leaves, sway in the cold wind... the sky is pale blue and there is not a single cloud...i hear children's cries or yells in the distance against the fluctuating sound of car engines nearby, the sound of tyres on tarmac.. and a deeper roar of heavier traffic further away on the motorway...

...from this garden shelter there is no one to be seen - perhaps i am the only one with the time and inclination to be here at this moment ...

...and now a man and a woman enter, hesitate, look around, and then follow the rectangular path encircling the lawns and the ornamental shrubs - soon they reappear at the end of their brief journey through this geometric horticultural paradise...

...my fingers are getting cold so i decide to walk on...

...i move closer to the bamboo plantation and look at the long triangular leaves, growing in ones, twos and threes, and mostly pointing downwards (as in a Chinese painting)... i see that the gardeners have attempted a Chinese garden with rocks and bamboos and ferns on a steep but very artificial incline...

'Is this garden artificial?'

asks a voice from Denmark*

‘Almost entirely so’

comes the thought, as i realise how very artificial this garden is, and so is any...

...the rectangular layout, the transported plants from distant countries, the influence of Chinese culture on European gardening, the myth of the garden as paradise, the botanical and local names for plants here set out on labels next to each plant, the closely mown grass, and the enclosing fence (with its low gate and padlock) separating a semi-wild forest park (that is always open) from this wholly artificial garden (that is open only in daylight).

...and as i contemplate these aspects of gardening as artifice, i remember how i dislike gardens, and the never-ending tasks they create (the struggle against nature) and how i so much prefer the forest, the mountain-top, the beach, the sea, the sky, the universe even though it includes some gardens (often much loved... by the people who create them, at least!)

...and how much less do i like the house, the shop, the factory, the school, the church, the office, the graveyard... but the road i can forgive or even enjoy, even the railway, the bridge, the dam, the windmill, the radio aerial, anything that fosters mobility, communication, and changes of mind...

...but all these things get owned and misused by organisations seeking profit from the repetition and the predictability of life if artificially (!) controlled and cultivated to appeal to what is most predictable in us...

...i suspect it was lucky for us that our mythical ancestors left the Garden of Eden** but unlucky that they took to agriculture and to other kinds of crime against human nature, as it was... (you can see i'm getting confused!)

**As i wrote of the Garden of Eden i was thinking of John Milton's description, in *Paradise Lost*, 1674, of how Adam and Eve left the garden:

The World was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

Their expulsion from Paradise was, you might say, a beginning of humanism - but not of artificiality...

...evidently your question confuses me. It seems to question our existence, spiritual or physical, and to call for a new perception of what it is we are doing, in our artificial way...

*the voice of Ida Engholm, one of the editors of Artifact (a new academic journal devoted to the influence of computing on design)... she has asked me to reply to the question 'what is an artifact?' and these thoughts in a garden are what her question provoked... some other thoughts about things artificial and things natural appear elsewhere in my digital diary, or in softopia, my public writing place. Here are 8 of them - they are results of a computer search for diary pages including "natural things" + "artificial things":

- [1. what is unnatural?](#)
- [2. among machines and beyond](#)
- [3. change in all its forms](#)
- [4. the chain saw and the dummy](#)
- [5. news of the world](#)
- [6. the ancient mariner \(of technology\)](#)
- [7. natural and artificial](#)
- [8. not a table and chair](#)

number 7 includes a link to [‘afternature’](#) which includes a link to [Maya Deren’s theories of film-making and nature](#)

number 8 includes a link to the theories of [Immanuel Kant](#)

...yes, these pages seem closer than i thought to answering the question ‘what is an artifact?’

...several days later:

realising that this writing is also an artifact, composed of physical and hence natural as well as abstract components (i.e. electro-magnetic elements of the pixels on this glass screen and the abstract conventions which give each letter, word, sentence, paragraph (etc.) its meaning)...

...realising all that, i see that ‘reality’ itself is neither wholly natural nor wholly artificial but is surely a blend that exists throughout and beyond anything i (or perhaps anyone) can say about it?

...and at this perhaps unsatisfactory (but perhaps truthful) point i have to leave the question incompletely answered - such is our predicament, perhaps fortunate!

(these pages are designed to be read with the window set to two-thirds of the screen width)

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