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George Steinmann's *The Saxeten Work*

Having suggested ways in which aesthetics and ethics bridge art and place, it is now possible to show more concretely how environmental theologies and theologies of the arts enrich one another. Throughout I have suggested that our sense of place illuminates our perceptions of art, and simultaneously poetic reflections on art sharpen our sense of place. Our interpretations of art and place, I have argued, are theologically aesthetically and ethically correlated. By focusing on the correlations of art, place, aesthetics and ethics delineated above, we are able to sketch a theological interpretation of individual works of art or particular places. In other words, the foregoing orients us to find the sacred depth of particular manifestations of art and place.

Bernese artist George Steinmann's *The Saxeten Work, a Growing Sculpture* (original German: *Das Werk Saxeten, Eine Wachsende Skulptur*), created 2002-06, shows how these theological correlations aid in how we approach art and place. This work is a poignant example for many reasons. Foremost, it is simultaneously a work of art and a reflection on place; it naturally serves to reflexively mark both culture and nature, creation and environment. Further, Steinmann's work is unusually sensitive to its trans-disciplinary boundarycrossing; as an artist he creates works that transcend the gallery, in many ways. Finally, Steinmann is open to the theological resonance of both art and the spirit of place. Thus Steinmann's work confounds any attempt to frame his work simply as art or environment, conceptual or perceptual, aesthetic or ethical, sacred or secular. By reflecting on how *Saxeten* concretizes the discussion above, then, we are able to analyze the theological importance of this work of art.

Saxeten is a work created for the Canton and the University of Bern. While commissioned as part of a renovation of a former hospital into a new building for the University of Bern, the work extends past this site into the village of Saxeten and the Alps. Saxeten is a small, economically poor village in the canton, and thus the work has a significant impact there. Steinmann explains the work in this way:

The work consists of three parts—a bridge for pedestrians, a cabin, and photographs. The bridge has two functions: it is a bridge that restores the hiking trail across the Saxetbach that was interrupted by the floods of summer 2005. It is also a symbolic act of crossing a boundary and a symbol of the dialogue between town and country. Between center and periphery. The second part, the cabin, is accessed by the hiking trail; it's a place where you can rest, think, or meditate and is available to everyone, irrespective of their background or views. This lends the space another, higher significance. It embraces the world symbolically and invites the visitors to the mountain valley of Saxeten. From the cabin there are sweeping views to the north, beyond the valley, to the south into the valley, and towards the Alps. It is a motif from landscape painting, a quote, and yet tangibly real at the same time. The third part is the location of the work in photographs at the University of Bern.

Steinmann's work is centered on bridging art and place through ways of knowing. For Steinmann, it is important to approach this as more than simply an aesthetic object, and instead to see it as part of a transdisciplinary way of knowing. The work, in other words, is grounded on a conviction that everything is related—to recall the hermetic circle, the whole and the parts necessarily intertwine in *Saxeten*.

Steinmann's concerns in *Saxeten* illuminate much of the theological discussion above. Foremost, he is interested in a reflection the entwined categories of culture and nature, but recognizes the need to look at these categories through the particular. Thus, in *Saxeten* we see a dismantling of the nature/culture divide, toward a more satisfying mediation of art and place.

To be sure, the work contains created objects and visual images. At the same time, it attempts to open up a place for perception and poetic reflection. In other words, Steinmann drinks deeply of a *particular place* through a *particular work of art*, and *vice versa*. Art becomes a lens, a poetic way of knowing. This echoes our concern to move from nature and culture to the hermeneutical investigation between place and art. In fact, many of Steinmann's other artworks share with *Saxeten* a sense of reflection on the meaning of place from a transdisciplinary perspective. His restoration of the Tallinn Art Hall—a work called *The Revival of Space*—is Steinmann's concern for broadening the meaning of art, just as *Komi* seeks to know the place of the northern forests. Thus, Steinmann reaffirms in *Saxeten* and other works the strict separation between culture and nature. It cannot adequately be analyzed as environment, nor is it simply a cultural artifact. It is, rather, a work at the boundaries. In turn, *Saxeten* becomes an object of study for several different forms of theology of culture, insofar as it can be explored as a work of fine art, and as an instantiation of place and environment.

Insofar as *Saxeten* is both art and environment, it is bridged by aesthetics and ethics. In terms of aesthetics, we noted above (point 1) that the work of art becomes a way of orienting perception in light of individuals and communities. Gerhard Mack suggests, in relation to Steinmann's *Metalog*, "Art has the task of inventing so that we can have experiences that make us aware of modes of perception, of their possibilities and limits." Art is an opening, a manifestation of how we are embodied and interacting in the world. A place, in this view, becomes a boundary that situates and grounds the perception (point 2). Approaching *Saxeten*, we can see that Steinmann seeks to incorporate both of these aesthetic responses into the work. *Saxeten* is concerned with connecting communities with each other, and opening up new ways of viewing. The cabin within the work, for instance, marks the ways through which we can re-envision the world around it. But at the same time, this is not a disembodied piece that seeks only intellectual reflection. And thus Steinmann has also created a definite space in the world, using local timber and craftsman to create a place through which such perception is gathered and rendered meaningful. Insofar as these two points are applicable to Steinmann's work, so too is the theological correlation noted above: *Saxeten* is finally a reflection on the Sacred, insofar as it is where place and art exhibit the placeless creativity that covers and reveals the finite, material creation encountered by our interpretations of perceptual experience.

Just as our understanding of *Saxeten* can be understood through aesthetics, it also illustrates the ethical dimensions of art and place. In fact, many of Steinmann's works are concerned with the need for art to advance our sense of responsibility; his art shows a concern for ethics and healing that is evocative of earlier artists such as Beuys. Thus Hildegard Kurt writes of *Komi*, "Conceived as a *growing sculpture*, *Komi* undermines the growth dogma of industrial modernity, i.e. the ideology of faster, higher, further, more. The growth that Steinmann has in mind does not involve more and more of everything—in a bio-physically limited system. It does not mean the macabre programme of material accumulation that is threatening to drive our whole world into a kind of collective suicidality. ... [The] collapse of false wealth is necessary for the long-term well-being of mankind. Only Earth's material, biophysical dimension is limited. The spiritual-cultural dimension of our existence on this Earth wants to grow and do so continuously—the evidence for this lies in *Komi, a Growing Sculpture*."⁴⁵ Certainly this reflection is applicable to *Saxeten*, and shows the ethical groundwork of Steinmann's work overall.

When discussing ethics above, we noted that art is an opening for liberation, while place provides us with a situation or limit from ethical responsibility. This we see in *Saxeten*. Certainly *Saxeten* opens ethical possibilities for us (point 3). By the creation of the work, Steinmann asks us to reimagine place: to see the village of *Saxeten*—and the Canton of Bern, the Alps, and finally our own sense of being in the world—with new eyes. He has described this as a process, and suggests that the work contains a theme of future viability. The artwork is concerned with perception, to be sure, but it deals with the problems of society, economics, environment, etc.—that is to say, all of the problems in our world that stem from the same problem: our "crisis of perception." In other words, *Saxeten* contains the process for a new way

of knowing, which is inherently ethical. In discussing the work, Steinmann said, “If you consider art as an epistemological medium, it does contain an immaterial ethical dimension and, with that, a universal culture of responsibility, which is to say, actions based on an ethos for posterity.”⁴⁶ But such liberative possibilities must be grounded somewhere, lest they become mere utopian fantasy (point 4). *Saxeten* drew together specialists and works around a particular site. By concerning himself with the revitalization of a particular space, Steinmann was able to focus us on a particular ground or foundation for ethical reflection. The work sees itself addressing the concrete and particular, highlighting the limits of place—and only thereby its future. This ethical concern points us toward a theological message implicit in Steinmann’s work: *Saxeten* is a manifestation of how the Sacred exists at the ecstatic union of understanding; poetic and platial theological reasoning centers on the intersection of emplaced stability of responsibility, the freeing novelty of liberation, and the Sacred dialectic between them.”

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