

Facing up

Michael Glasmeier

“There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It is human, it is divine, carrion. If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life, as from that dry and parching wind of the African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth and nose and ears and eyes with dust till you are suffocated, for fear that I should get some of his good done to me,—some of its virus mingled with my blood.”

Henry David Thoreau

In 1845 the transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) set out on an experiment which was to last for two years, and which, through his report, was to become a manifesto for a way of life, for a philosophy, and for art—a manifesto still vibrant today. This is the more surprising, as Thoreau actually did not do very much. He moved to the woods next to Lake Waiden, near Concord, Mass., where he built a hut and tried to live and feed himself with as little effort as possible. This was no exceptional feat; the next village was but a 50-minute walk away, and the noise from the nearby railway line kept him connected to civilization. Thoreau just moved up the road to a lonely garden plot, into a habitation fitting such an environment. Drop-outs, hippies, communards, and burnt-out managers who later came to glorify and mystify Thoreau’s deed, thus laying the foundation for his present fame, were very liberal in their interpretation of what actually happened. A close reading of *Walden* (Boston, 1854) reveals a Thoreau surprisingly at odds with what received wisdom would have. Thoreau is no dropout from city life, no enemy of civilization, no recluse despising society—his hut is neither a survival camp, nor a spot of romantic solitude. Thoreau does not drop out; he does not turn away. He is a drop-in; he faces up to things. The American transcendentalists, a life philosophical club based in Concord and centered on

Thoreau’s teacher Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose essay *Nature* (1836) mapped out their intellectual foundation, held that nature was not mainly a scientific, rational entity but something more spiritual, something to be grasped intuitively and spontaneously. Thus the transcendentalists transcend the much-admired Kant, fusing Goethe’s contemplative spirit of enquiry with Master Eckhart’s transcendencies. Their stance poses European thought against homegrown puritanism. The avenging god has vanished. Truth, to them, is to be found in nature’s magnificent, many-tongued book—a book interweaving all facets of life, a quilt of the changing seasons, neither serene, nor complacent.

Thoreau’s facing up transforms a theoretical stance into action. It is a kind of exercise. His book describing the microcosm of the lakeshore, right in the center of nature’s encyclopedia, is composed of many different strata. It contains practical advice on how to construct a hut, on how to grow beans. It is a sociological study of country folk and of means of transport. It is a tract on nutrition, on forestry, as well as on politics, education, and religion. All of it is executed with much detail; all of it is spiced with an utmost sensibility for what is essential.

And of course it is a philosophical book, too. Yet Thoreau’s hut is not Diogenes’ tub. His modest hut, a well-built habitation for one, is no cell for meditation; it is Thoreau’s base camp for numerous ventures and returns. If the weather allows, Thoreau is a permanently on the move. He is in the woods, on top of the mountain, he is in, on, and at the lake, in the village, and at his neighbour’s. At home crazy forest folk, runaway slaves, and all kinds of animals visit the poet. And Thoreau is open to all of it. Everything is made welcome, nothing excluded—to him everything is an equal part of nature.

Thus Thoreau enters the realm of the arts—music, literature, sculpture, painting, and architecture are seen as mainly derived from nature and less from culture. This is a novel point of view. Thoreau’s vision radicalizes an idea already

touched on by the German romantics. The decisive point for him is not that art imitates or interprets nature, nor is it that nature itself is the great artist. Thoreau does not introduce hierarchies into his perception, and for that reason is able to experience his small, modest corner of the world at the lakeside as somewhat oscillating between nature and art. To his ear the sound of a passing train is of equal value as the strange sounds of birds. To his view all objects are ready made, objects characterized, according to Marcel Duchamp, by this same oscillation, a state of in between. The divine quality which Thoreau either misses, or which he negates, is symbolism—to him things are things. His aim is to register everything as of equal value, as aesthetic experience. Beyond all symbolism he perceives the outside world as a pleasing occurrence to the senses.

Thoreau: “In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

To a large extent this foundation is defined by the pleasures of perception, pleasures heightened through simplicity. The grand gestures of art are banal compared to an inquisitive mouse—not because the mouse is perceived as natural or divine—but simply because it is a mouse, a being producing movements and sensations which are aesthetically satisfying.

Such substantiality can only be reached if simplicity extends to all levels, i.e., Thoreau has to accept the mouse as mouse, himself as himself, with nothing intervening out of the “other” world. Thoreau’s artless perception is based on a radical acceptance.

This is the reason why Thoreau’s book is funny. If things major are put on the same level with things minor, if the world is seen not as vertical but as horizontal, comic collisions are inevitable. Thoreau does not have to tell jokes; the joke

is part of the things he describes. This makes astonishing reading.

Composers like Charles Ives (1874–1954) and John Cage (1912–1992) admire Thoreau as an acoustician who accepts the equality of all sounds, as someone facing up to the noises of nature and civilization alike, perceiving music in all of them.

There is more to it. Both composers stress that Thoreau’s attitude towards life and art is ideal as it aims to transpose every manifestation of power into the indeterminate. Cage: “Thoreau shows us that there is not much contact between us and the government. Generally speaking such encounters are very formal matters, quickly forgotten, easily transgressed. Thoreau insists that there must be minimal coercion in such relationships, with such links. Were they tighter, we would not be able to survive.”

Thoreau’s original hut is not existant. Shortly after the experiment it was pulled down and the wood was used to build a barn. Tobias Hauser’s reconstruction of the hut on the wasteland of Berlin’s Leipziger Platz creates a space for the ideas of Waiden to live on. Right in the center of the architectural manifestations of political and economic power, near Potsdamer Platz, this modest hut is a divergent model of political, economic, and artistic thought, yet a model that may not be interpreted as turning away from society. It is no romantic, soulful metaphor but action born out of acceptance; it is not an instance of flippant rejection but above all a *Denkraum*, a space for reflection in the tradition of Aby Warburg. Contrary to received opinion we are not a herd of consumer animals, wTe, ourselves, act out politics, economics, and art — and that is true the more we accept what wre have to accept and get back down to earth.

This sense of “earth” can be grasped in Tobias Hauser’s reconstruction. The urban area surrounding it is vertical, upwardly mobile—world without end. The hut introduces horizontal thinking, thinking large in scope but not without limit. Thus the factual is taken into account

and the wasteland hemmed in by manifestations of architecture is temporarily transformed into a piece of residual nature.

It is an illusion to perceive of the urban as the opposite of nature. For Thoreau such clichés are immaterial. Nature is where we, with due regard to the principles of equality, open ourselves to perception; nature is where our aesthetic pleasure feels at home, where noises dwell, no matter what noises.

Tobias Hauser's reconstruction is at once a statue, architecture, a monument history, a sound sculpture, philosophy, aesthetics—and it is political, too. Let us then, as Thoreau did, invite all and everything into this space for productive thinking, this space in the center of Berlin, in the middle of bleak times, to pleasantly exercise the perception of things equal, to exercise the facing up to things.

Thoreau: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

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Quelle: