

Nature and I are two: reconnecting people with the planet

Clive Adams¹

At the heart of today's ecological crisis lies a terrible failure to understand the essence of our relationship with the natural world. One can of course address that failure rationally and empirically; but the arts (particularly the visual arts) offer different insights into that relationship, and touch people in ways that conventional education and advocacy can rarely do.

Jonathon Porritt CBE

Throughout history, when civilizations become stressed by environmental degradation there is a recurrent need for new art forms to evolve which remind humanity of its connection to the rest of nature and the responsibility it bears to the planet.

The landscapes painted on the walls of Roman villas during the first century BC gave the impression of being surrounded by pleasant groves, yet were painted during a period of over-cultivation and deforestation. In the seventeenth century, painters such as Claude and Poussin offered an Arcadian vision of nature, as a form of solace in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. Blake and Turner both attempted to maintain our bond with nature but our estrangement accelerated during the Industrial Revolution. During years of conflict in the first half of the twentieth century, artists in Britain adopted a plurality of approaches to nature, from re-awakening a sense of the 'pastoral' ideal to helping frame our national identity.

In the 1960s, however, political and social changes encouraged artists to address nature in new ways. The destruction of habitats worldwide and the deteriorating condition of urban life also triggered a new wave of activism and environmental awareness. Organizations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth also originated in this period.

For some artists, painting landscapes as a way of seeing seemed increasingly incompatible with a new sense of our relationship with the Earth seen from space, and through the eyes of different cultures and religions. Artists and designers continued to be influenced by the imagery, colours and textures in nature, but they also sought to work in a way that reflected how nature itself worked and to understand the new scientific theories and processes underlying the natural world. This approach can also be traced in the recent history of literature, film, dance/movement, music/sound, performance and criticism.

Since that time, artists of all kinds have responded to nature, landscape and the environment in many, often quite different ways and this is largely because they are engaging with the different meanings and cultural constructions that we give to these

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terms in the twenty-first century. However, not all are strictly addressing ecological concerns. Ecology does not seem to have been the prime concern of, for example, many of the early American 'Land Artists'. Artists such as Michael Heitzer and Dennis Oppenheim were more concerned with creating earthworks as grandiose forms of abstract sculpture, and Christo with using technology and manufactured structures to dominate the landscape.

The problem with such work was that it tended to objectify the environment and turn it into an entity that we can think of and deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves. Far more important, I suggest, is work - such as that of Richard Long and Ana Mendieta - that cultivates a one-to-one relationship with the land and which looks at art as a process in much the same way as we look at nature itself.

We might define the most profound form of ecological, socially engaged art, design or architecture to be that which explores, exposes and tries to find strategies to remedy the exploitation, waste and pollution of nature through direct action and sustainable design. The teaching and practice of Joseph Beuys encapsulates this approach, but artists as diverse as Agnes Denes and Barbara Kruger all question our consumer society and attempt to find a role for art that is more than mere decoration and the production of investment commodities for collectors. Work, which is most specifically ecological, might be described as that which, for instance, transforms damaged habitats or sterile urban sites into life-generating places. Mel Chin and Viet Ngo's use of plants to revive polluted landfill sites and treat wastewater are perfect examples of this approach.

The publication 'Ecovention: current art to transform ecologies', produced to accompany an exhibition in Cincinnati in 2002, provides a good analysis of ecological art – albeit with an American emphasis – of projects by such artists as Helen and Newton Harrison, Alan Sonfist, Hans Haacke and Basia Irland. There is, however, important work being done by groups and individuals around the world today and an excellent source of information, and a way of networking, is through the web site www.greenmuseum.org. In Britain, groups such as Platform, Common Ground and Helix Arts are among those that have made important contributions to art and ecology over many years.

At the start of this new Millennium we are faced by a convergence of environmental concerns, particularly global warming, deforestation, loss of habitat, species depletion and GM foods. The Greek root of the word 'ecology' means 'home' and for many, as Suzi Gablik has written, it's a hard place to find these days. By pursuing production and the capitalist idea of 'progress' at the expense of sustainability and a concern for process we have lost connection within both our local communities and our global home.

The important contribution that the mainstream arts can play in addressing these issues seems finally to have become appreciated and acted upon in the past few years. The Royal Society of Arts has launched its 'Arts and Ecology' programme and the South West – Devon, in particular – is fast becoming the UK centre for a number of important new courses attracting students to study the subject. Bicton College and the University of Plymouth offer the first Foundation Degree in 'Environmental Arts and Crafts', University College Falmouth has its 'Research in Art, Nature and Environment' group, Schumacher College offers short courses in 'Art and Ecology' and Dartington College started an important new MA course in September 2006.

After ten years of effort, the first phase of the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World opened in Haldon Forest Park near Exeter in April 2006. CCANW is an innovative educational charity, which uses the Arts to explore new understandings of our changing relationship to Nature. Earlier this year it celebrated its first anniversary at Haldon, having welcomed 30,000 visitors/participants (double those anticipated) to its new Project Space. This represents the first phase of an exciting new, long-term partnership with the Forestry Commission.

Adapted from a 40-year-old wooden shed at a total cost of £96,000, the 140m² Project Space (part gallery/studio/office) was created with grant aid from the Arts Council England and others. The Project Space is the base for an integrated artistic and educational programme which covers all art forms and takes place there, in the forest and other locations and includes exhibitions, residences, projects, workshops, live events and talks.

In May 2007, with the benefit of a special grant from South West Woodland Renaissance (an RDA scheme), CCANW launched *Wood Culture*, a year long festival celebrating the beauty, usefulness and sustainability of wood in contemporary architecture and design, designed to be engaging to the widest audience, from those with a professional interest to the youngest visitor. The programme comprises of a series of exhibitions, events and activities designed to demonstrate how timber growing, new technologies, and the use of wood in construction and as fuel can provide considerable environmental benefits, particularly in helping to reduce global warming. The most recent exhibition, *Inspiring Futures*, featured CCANW's selection of twelve of the most inspiring examples of contemporary European timber architecture and goes on to be shown at the Architecture Centre, Bristol from 16 October-18 November.

The final exhibition of 2007, from 17 November-23 December, will be the first complete showing of *Greenhouse Britain: Losing ground, gaining wisdom*, a major exhibition created by Harrison Studio and Associates and largely funded by DEFRA.

These recent developments and CCANW's partnership with the Forestry Commission will all bring tremendous opportunities to engage new audiences, participants and collaborations – both local and global – in programmes of artist-led projects, exhibitions and educational activities that will reach out, across the art forms and other disciplines, to develop new understandings of our connection and responsibilities to nature in the modern world.