

Eco Art: art is life and life is embedded in nature.

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Abstract

Nature may be considered as the world of living organism and their environment; in a larger sense the shape of Nature can also be understood to include particular extents of space and time. The visual perspectives of Nature form a particular course that begins with the earliest historical depictions and might be currently expressed by a variety of cross-disciplinary contributions. The diverse perspectives form eclectic threads that today are frequently manifested within the Eco-Activist art movement. Several of the contemporary ecological art projects are grounded in explicit experiences and connections to specific spaces relevant to where the work is created. The local or international ecological labs, experimental urban gardens, projects on the migration of plants and creation of new species included here are all new models contributing to a speculative future culture.

Keywords

Ecological art, activism, sense of space

The subject of Nature in its varying guises is perhaps the oldest theme appearing in the history of art dating back over 30 thousand years that began with the deceptively primitive, cave paintings and subsequently appeared in the most diverse forms. Over the millennia dramatic shifts can be observed in our attitude to, and representation of Nature - always linked to political, religious, environmental and social considerations that frequently evade easy explanation.

Contrary to popular belief, human interference with the environment – including detrimental consequences - dates back thousands of years; well before the advent of the modern period and its 'new' preoccupation with ecological harmony. While today the media as well as the general public seem (justifiably) obsessed with current ecological disasters and catastrophic predictions of global warming, the impact of climate change has been a compelling factor for social collapse around the world for many centuries. A number of famous historical examples eloquently described by Jared Diamond include Easter Island, the Mayan

Empire, the North American Anasazi tribes and the Viking colonies in Greenland among others [1]. Nevertheless, the risk of an impending ecological collapse remains an increasing concern on a wider level, especially as the environmental complexities confronting us today include some of the same factors that ruinously destabilized societies in the past.

Since the second half of the 20th century the traditional definition of "landscape" has been increasingly challenged as powerful shifts have occurred in our attitudes towards Nature. Today's emphasis on the process in environmental arts rather than on the appearance of the presented works owes much to the fact that in numerous cases the operating method has substantially changed. More specifically over the past few decades there has been a critical transition from passive representation to active involvement with nature in the sciences as well as in the arts [2]. Furthermore, in order to recognize the social, economic and cultural impact of climate change, artists frequently utilize innovative technical tools to comprehend basic functions in our ecological environment including animals and plants in urban settings.

Today museums as well as alternate exhibition venues are steadily exploring a variety of digital and mobile technologies to better involve visitors. In addition to mobile applications and on-line opportunities such as YouTube other boundaries have shifted beyond previously imagined settings. Audience participation became a major issue and social media have also contributed to an increased participatory experience.

This situation is especially pertinent for the development and presentations of ecological art works. Art as it is practiced today not only integrates audiences into the process at a much earlier stage than before the use of new technologies and unconventional materials but also blurs the boundaries between everyday life and art.

Collaboration is characteristic of many of the ecological art projects, nevertheless there are

several eminent art works developed and presented by individual artists. The inclusion of diverse materials, performances, informal conferences and alternate open-air methods such as exhibitions on urban rooftops, in parks or a walking symposium along a riverbank encourage audience participation by a large extent.

Wheatfield is one of the excellent early eco art projects by Agnes Denes, who planted a 2-acre wheat field in 1982 in downtown Manhattan [3]. Her work fittingly illustrates the notion of reframing Nature in this case reaffirming a rural landscape in an urban space. Her pioneering eco art project presented a challenging, provocative gesture confirmed by her own words: Manhattan is the richest, most professional, most congested and, without a doubt, most fascinating island in the world. To attempt to plant, sustain and harvest 2 acres of wheat here, wasting valuable real estate and obstructing the "machinery" by going against the system, was an effrontery that made it the powerful paradox I had sought for the calling to account. It was insane. It was impossible. But it did call people's attention to having to rethink their priorities and realize that unless human values were reassessed, the quality of life, even life itself, was in danger...*Wheatfield* was a symbol, a universal concept..." [4] Denes' purpose of selecting and subsequently using this central Manhattan space for her public art project remains timely over three decades and is in line with the contemporary Eco-Activist movement.

Annemie Maes' work provides a more recent example of urban activism [5]. She analyzes growth processes, isolates them or causes them to appear under different conditions in a specific urban setting. In the open-air lab on the rooftop of her studio, she created an experimental garden and has been keeping bees in non-intrusive self-designed beehives, equipped to bring out hidden configurations, hidden structures in the structured life of the colony. She always employs a wide range of multimedia approaches in her installations and videos.

Annemie is a representative of a new wave of artists for which art is life and life is embedded in nature. These artists link our work and life to the natural environment partly by using the exceptional possibilities provided by advanced information and communication technologies. Maes is the founding director of several non-profit art organizations including OKNO an artists run organization working with new media art and ecology in Brussels [6]. The Open Green rooftop garden and the online server are used as research environments during a continuous

program of residencies, workshops, meetings, exhibitions and performances [7]. Annemie's roof garden in the very center of her city has inspired a core of others both in Belgium and around Europe to create and actively use alternative spaces for research, development and presentations of their ecological projects frequently in inner-city settings.

My personal experience with OKNO included participation in the Time Inventors' Kabinet [TIK] an ecological "time and art project" project extended over several years [8]. Not only did we have basic, but informative DIY workshops across Europe (always adjusted to our sense of the particular location), we also had discussions, concerts in the courtyard of industrial buildings, conferences exhibitions of surprising ecological projects complete with a closing exhibition in Brussels including a walking symposium, - all informal and very well attended.

Olga Kisseleva's *Eden* project is yet another worthy example to consider. *Eden* is concerned with bringing physically (but not genetically) extinct species back to life in particular regions or spaces, or of creating new species on the preexisting base of DNA. Olga employs this broad concept to specific spaces such as Curitiba, Brazil or exploring nearly vanished botanical species on the Russian/Finnish border. Thanks to current advances in genetic technology her undertaking became not only possible, but also an actual reality. In Olga's words: "A truly artistic utopia, assuming that extinction, despite its supposedly definitive and irreversible characteristic, can be revoked thanks to the advancement of contemporary human civilization. The realization of this utopia therefore allows for the preservation of biological diversity, the reestablishment of weakened ecosystems and the deletion imagined by the damage caused to nature by man" [9]. It was noted that Olga with her *Eden* project re-examines standard approaches to ecological problems through technology, by letting trees speak. To be more specific *Eden* is developed on the basis of a scientific observation: trees communicate with one another and their environment, by sharing molecular information. Several scientists including forest ecologist Suzanne Simard, Paul Wohlleben and researchers at the Mack Planck Society confirmed Olga's concept [10, 11].

Intercreate.org is a project-based organization in New Zealand working with art, science, culture and technology. The organization was

established in 2007 and originally arose from the *Solar Circuit Aotearoa New Zealand (SCANZ)* residency in 2006 [12]. Global and local environmental change is a major concern for Intercreate as well as building and maintaining close relationships with tangata whenua (the People of the Land as Maori refer to themselves). Consequently indigenous groups and individuals are involved at SCANZ in all discussions of local, regional, national and international ecological issues.

The SCANZ example of closely working with Maori iwi-s and individual artists in New Zealand on environmental issues has recently expanded into Australia where now local organizers began to collaborate with indigenous people on similar projects.

The bi-annual SCANZ residencies consist of an introductory hui at a Maori marae (meeting place), followed in New Plymouth by individual/collaborative project work or workshops, a public exhibition and a closing hui or symposium. Over the years numerous artists who work with climate change gathered at the residencies from all over the world bringing their cross-disciplinary projects to New Plymouth, NZ. In addition to fostering interdisciplinary inter-cultural collaborations, participants had opportunities to gain insight in historical and contemporary Maori concepts on the surrounding environment and art.

To describe in detail the manifold, diverse SCANZ projects is outside the scope of this text however it might be useful to mention a few projects related to a sense of this place.

Stacey Aglook, Inuit artist came from Arctic Canada and created Water Music mixing traditional Inuit songs with the sound of the moving waters of a local river and tress. In Stacey's opinion traditional Inuit throat singing imitates the sound of the environment and was used as a game between women and to sooth the babies being carried on their backs. While at SCANZ Stacey and Jo Tito the well-known Maori artist started an ongoing ecological art project collaboration that is still in progress.

Jo Tito confesses: "I have a passion for life and love and caring for the earth". Jo participated in each and every SCANZ event where in addition to her own art contribution she would go out of her way to guide -especially the international participants- to significant Maori nature landmarks. SCANZ Ocean Energy 2017 is an artist residency project in Gisborne, NZ initiated and organized by Jo Tito. The residency is focused on research and collaborative ecological

art practice.

Darko Fritz, Croatian artist, curator, writer planted in 2013 *Turf* a 10 m diameter permanent horticultural unit aligned with the Southward equinox in the Pukekura Park in New Plymouth. "The installation acts as a small button at the Earth's land surface, interacting with the entire planet from its location at New Zealand (39°11'5'' S, 174°7'33'' E). The artist is asking visitors to refresh our relationship to the environment, in a project that mixes humble turf with modern electronics" [13].

The endurance performance by Julieanna Preston a performer and Professor of Spatial Practice in Wellington, NZ in 2015 was perhaps the most personal demonstration of a sense of place at SCANZ. Julianne was simply sitting for many hours among the rocks at the edge of the sea. This performance was really meaningful for all those who lived before and live today in New Plymouth or Taranaki as the Maori call it.

A closing feature of the SCANZ residencies is the public exposure of the art works, sometimes in a gallery, or on the streets in the center of the town, or on the banks of the local river but most typically in the famous Pukakura Park. This event extends visibility of the exhibition beyond the regular gallery going visitors to every segment of society in the city, creating an awareness of ecological issues and the arts.

In addition to all these projects outlined above, there are countless remarkable initiatives addressing the issues concerning the impact of climate change on the environment and offering attempts towards solutions or bringing to our mind the dangers lurking around us. Many eco-art projects might only create broader comprehension for climate change issues and dangers, however visibility is already the first step towards public awareness.

The full range of these initiatives is outside the scope of this brief essay, sufficient to note that from Yo-yo's rural projects in the Czech Republic to the "Micronation/ Macronation Project" by The House of Natural Fiber in Indonesia, Eco Activist artists remain continuously and consistently active and fully engaged with the public [14,15].

In conclusion, ecological art initiatives are both questioning and confronting the ways in which we have interfered in the natural environment. They remind us to remember, reflect, reconsider and ultimately re-evaluate how we relate to the world around us. Moreover, such artists increasingly take on the role of alternative knowledge producer, involved in

developing differing models and presenting issues that are marginalized in mainstream culture. While Eco- activist art is finding a foothold within the artistic domain the question remains is this enough?

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