

EPHEMERA ART & DETRITUS

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ABSTRACT

Visual art as a knowledge based practice holding an appreciation of ephemera and change is at the basis of my research. This research investigates artists' concepts integral with change in environment and ecology. My practice based art research investigates ephemera and change as metaphors in ecology. Both involve writing about the creation of a culture of impermanent art. This art has the ability to act as a potential metaphor in a dialogue about environmental sustainability.

In previous art movements it has been the manifesto of the artist that initially calls to witness the community's ability to engage with the most difficult problems. Art is a philosophical investigation, and it is the enquiring nature of the creative mind that can expose an appropriate practice, such as waste management, that emerges from a place of no sustainability to a culture of carefully managed ecology.

The rationale for the instability of the icon and image in art leads to the development of an argument for change of attitude about detritus and ephemera in contemporary society. A change in responsibility for our garbage or refuse, calls for an acceptance of beauty in the old, worn and decaying object.

Study in this area has investigated examples of aesthetics of decay in art and literature. Practice-based art research shares a perspective with writers about our sustainable future, where art and qualitative research have a common methodology with science in the reappraisal of future responsibility for waste products and an appreciation of the longevity of the pre-waste product, wanted or unwanted.

KEY WORDS

Ephemeral Art, Sustainable Resource Use.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of the problem addressed by this paper is referenced by Collins and Goto (2004) in a definition of post-industrial "Post-industrial refers to the shift from carbon based industrial power and production towards a computer based economy of information, goods and services that began in the late 1970s. The post-industrial condition includes a pervasive legacy of human produced pollution that affects air, soil, water and ultimately the climate of the planet" (Collins and Goto 2004, 89).

The purpose and contribution of the paper lies in the manner and the ability of communities to react to this legacy, and for this reason I refer to Collins and Goto again; "The importance of ecological restoration is that many different professionals, including artists, and communities, are involved, experimenting with ways to rethink the nature-culture relationship as well as ways we can heal and repair problems that have been created. The work creates new intellectual and physical relationships between humans and nature, which can result in new understanding and interrelationship with meaning" (Collins and Goto 2004, 97).

Though change is inevitable and ongoing, the responses to the major problems in the natural environment that arise through dramatic change are not addressed with a balanced view from the broader population. The capacity of this population in any region, to manage environmental change, is a forceful and vital resource and yet the harnessing of the general population and their responsibility to the critical issues in the local area are not addressed as potential contingency in times of disaster.

Art writer, Lippard (2006) in “Beyond the Beauty Strip”, states; “Art is a framing device for visual and/or social experience and artists can be good at slipping between the institutional walls to expose the layers of emotional and aesthetic resonance in our relationships to the world” (Lippard 2006, 14). However Lippard also questions how we escape the frame and the preconceived notions of what art is. In this paper I will aim to expose and discuss some recent art practice relevant to this area where the boundary becomes increasingly diffused with other disciplines such as ecology and where artists work collaboratively with experts from other disciplines.

It is often the perspective bought about by the less outspoken that could be driving major community responses to many urgent situations (environmental management). The problem is encapsulated in the question. How can change, visible in nature and ephemeral artwork, be relevant and applied to a search for balance and equilibrium, that is, the sustainable, in a finite world of resources?

The contribution of my paper lies in the argument for the collaboration of science and culture in relationships such as those in ecotourism, for example, ‘visual interpretation’ and ‘explanatory signage’ are important contributing factors in enriching knowledge about and appreciation for ecology, especially where threatened fauna, and fragile ecosystems are being exhibited for tourism. Artists and scientists are already involved in ecotourism but in many instances there could be an enriching of collaboration where, as in art and architecture, mutual benefits are found for both fields. In Sri Lanka the group ‘Architecture for Humanity AfH’ developed ‘transitional schools that collect rainwater and use solar technology and, in one instance, wind generation for energy’ (Schmelzer 2006, 69).

Various sciences could gain by the boundary blurring empowered by artists, though it is important to acknowledge that care must be taken against the wavering of scientific rigour. In a JCU School of Arts and Social Sciences research seminar, 5th October 2007, anthropologists and artists acknowledged the common links possible through art and readings by Marc Augé (1995) where he states ‘the premiss of the object’ raises ‘doubts about the legitimacy of an anthropology of the near contemporaneity’ (1995, 16).

The ability of the art practitioner and critical thinker to examine from within or between disciplines often allows art the capacity to engage in new collaboration for sustainability and the future. Ephemeral art and/or ‘the performative object’ are temporary art pieces and agents of change to counter the archived and precious art object. They include; 1. Artist Wolfgang Laib’s Pollen 2005, (Bond, 2005); 2. Artist Telching Hsieh’s practice ‘exemplifies in a strikingly literal way the concept of living one’s life as a work of art’ (Tucker 2004, 22); 3. ‘writer and educator Carol Becker considers the issue of creativity and the “beginner’s mind” of the young artist. Becker uses “unknowing mind” an “idea central to Buddhist thought; 4. “Healing is a

recurrent theme in Cai's work. His techniques are the methods of a Shaman, bringing together dissimilar entities on the basis of their similitudes [vegetal mushrooms and atomic clouds on playing cards] ... to shuffle an antipode deck [and address the evils of atomic weapons]... Another shamanic ploy is humour that pokes fun at rationality (London 1999, 196); 5. Art as action and project is part of Cameron Sinclair's practice; "There are two things we adhere to. One is that quiet change matters. So we don't make a big deal out of it. And also, small projects can have really big impacts. We focus on very low-cost small projects, not because we want to help one family but we want to set a base to change policy" (Cameron Sinclair interviewed by Schmelzer 2006, 69); 6. Anne Lord's Impossible Bucket (2005-) is a metaphor for the container that no longer can hold water. It becomes an icon for and metaphor about how we use water; 7. Gustav Metzger's Shattered Stones 2007 carry meaning about an appreciation of the removable object and cultural philosophy to maintain place and the environment as part of a broader culture.

Lippard (2006) states "I like to think in terms of 'ripple effects', because the strongest activist art starts from a centre, a specific location, from a deep map, from consciously lived experience, then moves out from there. The relations between doing and seeing, action and vision, construction and perception, lie at the core of art that engages the land at ground level" (Lippard 2006, 15). Lippard's reference to strong activist art is also linked to my previous research topic and category 'ecologically oriented art'. For example, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, throughout the 1970s and into the 1990s, have continued to produce works of art that engage real-world ecological situations. Because ecosystems are amongst the most complex interactive networks of any kind, their work necessarily hinges on difficult issues (Adcock 1992, 36). For example, the Sava River Project in Croatia and Serbia (1988-91), started by the Harrisons using time-lines and non-traditional art activity, involved the whole river system. Non-traditional art activity, similar to those cited above, incorporates an ecological interaction with a local region, community or environment. The complexity of this project due to its scale and location required development and negotiation over a number of years. 'The World bank is now supporting the purification of the Sava River in Croatia and Serbia' (Helen Harrison interviewed by Adcock, 1992, 39), [amount undisclosed].

How can visual artists assist in the development of visual signage and meaning that moves both our cultural appreciation of environment and our empirical evidence about environment in a common best practice? The identification of the problem is one of the first areas where this collaboration could be extremely beneficial. Artists have been thrown the challenge by many curators of major art exhibitions where the rationale for the exhibition lies with the ability of the artists to engage in social and environmental problems of the times.

Barbara Matilsky⁶ in *Fragile Ecologies* (1992) provides substantial information on the development of art and environmental issues saying that many artists were also key personnel in the development of public awareness to issues of environment. Matilsky

⁶. Important historical references to the evolution of art and ecology in America are documented in Barbara Matilsky's 1992, publication *Fragile Ecologies Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions*, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

investigating this connection states that; ‘When overlaying environmental history with the history of art, there often exists a striking correlation between changes in the physical environment and the appearance of new art forms and images’ (Matilsky 1992, 6). For this reason it is significant to acknowledge a link between the history of environmental and green movements and the relationships between art practice and social change.

Avgikos and Matilsky relate the increasing threat to artists by loss of nature as a motivational force eventually leading to Eco Art. For example, Jan Avgikos writes that intense reverence for nature came only with the realisation that it could be lost, and that paradoxically traditional landscape painting in America coincided with the destruction of wilderness (Avgikos 1991, 105). Comparatively, Matilsky demonstrates that prior to the 1960s the stresses on environment, instead of communicating the alarm, resulted in many artists responding by “expressing a renewed reverence for nature’ and wanting to preserve nature as in a souvenir, clinging to a ‘nostalgic view of a disappearing phenomenon’ “ (Matilsky 1993, 19). The New Media Visual Artist is responsive to many platforms, in visual language and computational delivery systems or logistics, that can deliver messages in an efficient and dramatic manner.

The relationships and synergies formed between science systems and visual planners can create strength in the manner regional communities and then larger populations perceive their immediate environment and situation in relation to responsible ecological management and ownership of local problems.

Artist Joseph Beuys initiated problem solving equated with art and ecology and many artists have responded to his earlier writings and practice. The links between ecology and art are integral to the work of Beuys through his philosophy of “social sculpture” which aimed at applying creative activity to society’s needs (Adams 1992, 28). Simon Schama explains how Beuys sought to take ‘civic and historical action that would have direct public significance well beyond the norms of artistic communication,’ and that, one of the actions Beuys wanted to practise was ‘verwaldung: afforestation as redemption’ (Schama 1995, 124). In today’s world how do we manage the lasting or lingering material that is no longer of any immediate gain? That is a part of our worldly goods getting in the way of ‘homogenised and clean living’ a sterile place. What stage of involvement do artists take to do something about this material, categorised as waste? How does the acknowledgement of the value of this material lead to establishing new policy? Could we learn to love our rubbish and be responsible for it?

Hawkins (2006) provides some link between art and science; “Worms are good for seeing the links between philosophy and biology. They make a politics of active experimentation easy. It’s simple to nurture the generative possibilities of waste when you can harness the generosity of worms; they encourage an ethic of sustainability by default. But worms don’t eat broken fridges, or outmoded computers or mountains of plastic drink bottles...worms cannot deal with the ecological consequences of commodity cultures-the accumulation of wasted things and the toxicity and ruins such cultures create” (Hawkins 2006, 128). In my quest my collection of evidence is in artists’ works that forms part of a kit bag to produce knowledge for this argument, some is new knowledge and another part of the work belongs to old knowledge. The old and wise body of knowledge is about sustainability and how it has contributed to

meaningful ways of maintaining balance in the environment. The old knowledge belongs to a previous sense of aesthetics and wellbeing that has been investigated in cultures influencing Australia and originating beyond this country.

Lee (2004) discusses Marcel Duchamp's patron Catherine...Dreier's reference to an ancient Chinese definition of art: "For if one accepts the Chinese interpretation of art – that only that is art which inspires and releases the energy of the soul – then the tree takes on a new significance" (Lee 2004, 128). Lee (2004) stated that Dreier's reference is to a Chinese definition for the word "art" – "the planting of a tree" – that comes from an ancient Chinese dictionary almost 2,000 years old. The Shuo-wen chieh-tzu, written in 100 CE, is a rare book not even known to the average Chinese (Lee 2004, 129). The ideas influence worship, culture and daily life.

The lessons of older and longer surviving cultural practices are crucial to our understanding of the environment and the life-opportunities we would hope to choose. The first area in connection with choices about lifestyle is the basis of an understanding about a new sense of aesthetics and living with our products. Responsibilities for the product and the environment are intricately linked.

Amongst the findings of this research is the appreciation of cultural and environmental associations that have been at the basis of many cultures, but associations that are currently faced with threats by an acceptance of acquisition and consumption as a cultural goal. Short-term aspirations and a consumer culture have led to ignoring other important features of environment.

Threat to the survival of certain cultures and environments are a plausible area for critical dialogue. Emerging out of this ground or framework is the ability to show that those places and cultures that helped to create the understanding and knowledge about how to maintain and replenish life hold the key to their existence over a long time. How do these traditional practices/knowledge unite in the face of modernity?

Previous work in this area involves the collaboration between scientists and artists to use the resources available to both to drive new attitude to change. In the adoption of new networks in industry and culture the resources that have previously been closeted within disciplines are given new energy. In 1995 publications relating to the quest for art to intervene with science and ecology, existed in publications such as the United Nations Environment Publication, by Tolba, Mostafa K. and El-Kholy, Osama 1992, The World Environment 1972-92 Two Decades of Challenge.

However, in 2006 Land, Art A Cultural Ecology Handbook (2006) edited by Max Andrews includes many arts writers involved in writing and practicing ecology and art from within the art industry. This in itself is a significant change in publication about land, ecology and art. The title with emphatic break between land and art is a book documenting aspects of a major project supported by the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce (RSA) in partnership with Arts Council England as part of the Arts and Ecology programme. <http://www.rsa.org.uk/arts/index.asp> ⁷

⁷ Initiated in April 2005, the programme has since consisted of a series of initiatives including conferences, ongoing discourse, international research trips, education pilots, artists' projects and commissions, and a publication. The RSA is creating a growing network of groups and

Imagine if the Australian government could support such an organization for artists and alternative energy industries? A place to run trials and respond to local needs.

In the last four decades artists such as Merle Laderman-Ukeles have worked with local communities to resolve community issues and garbage collection or recycling. Laderman-Ukeles worked with the New York Sanitation Department in a proactive problem solving approach to bring the industry of garbage to the attention of the broader community (Lacy 1995) and (Matilsky 1993). Hans Haacke's (1993) position is that "An artist is not an isolated system. In order to survive he (sic) has to continuously interact with the world around him...Theoretically there are no limits to his involvement' (Gablik 1991, 115) and (Haacke 1993, 50). Haacke also sought to expose multi-national exploitation of labour in underdeveloped countries. Could major events be developed in Queensland where the artist and the community use their common requirements and belief systems to address the current issues at stake?

Miles (1997) declared that "Ecological issues are rising on political and art agendas; they inform Merle Laderman-Ukeles work with the New York Sanitation Department, Dominique Mazeaud's ritual cleaning of the Rio Grande, a study group and visit to Belize organised by Mark Dion with the Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group as part of Culture in Action, the work of the artists' group Platform in London,... the work of Helen and Newton Harrison, and art which is itself a process of healing the earth, such as Mel Chin's Revival Field" (Miles 1997, 182).

In a 2005 interview with Matthew Coolidge of the Los Angeles-based Centre for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) Kastner asked Coolidge what anthropogeomorphology meant. Coolidge responded, "It simply refers to human human-induced alterations or transformations of the landscape, and arguable everywhere...is to some degree transformed and affected by humans" (Coolidge cited by Kastner 2006, 23).

Kastner (2006) refers to the 1970s artist Smithson and how his "insistence on probing the most elemental dialectics (in/out, past/future, thing/idea, here/there) produced gaps in the conventional wisdom about them that remain tantalisingly open today. And any attempt to read contemporary projects against his example must begin with those that are, in their very character, open to and engaged with such indeterminacies, ready to plumb the destabilised zones between gesture and thing, between thing and place, between place and operation, between operation and audience" (Kastner 2006, 23). Having discussed the projects and contrasting Smithson's legacy of work such as Spiral Jetty and concept of there, with the Centre for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) <http://www.clui.org/> Kastner states; "Many of the CLUI projects I like the best take on this deteriorated future/past with the ostensibly deadpan eye of the archaeologist or archivist" (Kastner 2006, 23). 8

individuals concerned with the issues - alongside and working with other organisations who have similar concerns. These include Tipping Point, Cape Farewell and Arts Catalyst. More information about these projects can be found throughout this website. (<http://www.rsa.org.uk/arts/index.asp> 6 August 2007)

⁸ The Center for Land Use Interpretation is the lead agency in the establishment of the American Land Museum, a network of landscape exhibition sites being developed across the United States. The purpose of the museum is to create a dynamic contemporary portrait of the nation, a portrait composed of the national landscape itself (<http://www.clui.org/> 6 August 2007).

Referring to the conceptual language of Smithson as underdeveloped, Kastner (2006) says that the “drift of the conceptual rhetoric is unmistakable: emphasising a conviction in cross-disciplinary collaboration; revealing an affinity for education and research; displaying a sensitivity to mediation, both aesthetic and technological, and its affects on the circulation of information and larger socio-cultural conditioning; and foregrounding an advocacy for artworks that participate in the production of ‘a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists’ (Smithson in Writings p 379 cited in Kastner 2006, 25 & 28) [and] “...despite the ecological rhetoric, it seems safe to say that the idea of environmental remediation was for him more a situational strategy than a developing creed” (Kastner 2006, 28).

In these ‘sites of disturbance’ Smithson’s conceptual descendants can be found working in visual arts at the beginning of the second millennium. Artists are “...attracted to the considerable extra-institutional scope and nuance they offer, and the spaces they provide to move from a focus on grand phenomenological relationships with the land to the ramifying patterns of interaction and use that drive current social and political realities” (Kastner 2006, 28).

Contemporary artists Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti work on projects at a Guantanamo Bay site Guantanamo Initiative (2004-2005) suggest the variety of ways in which the “notion of landscape and its site-specific use and meanings have continued to provide inspiration for artistic interventions” (Kastner 2006). Büchel and Motti highlight the conditions under which the US government came to control the land where the prison camp and base are located. In 1959 the Castro Government tried to cancel the USA lease and when the US government would not relinquish the land the Cubans stopped cashing USA nominal rent cheques. ‘It is into this legal lacuna that Büchel and Motti’s project looks to intervene, proposing that the treaties be null and void’ so that a third party (the artists) might challenge US occupation, ‘unencumbered by the political stalemate that characterises US-Cuban relations (Kastner 2006, 28).

Similarly, Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla’s work shares a similar backdrop zone, a US colonial and military context in the Caribbean, 70% of which was occupied by US navy as a bombing range between 1941 and 2003. This resulted in considerable contamination and health concerns. One of three projects is described, Land Mark (Footprints) (2001-04) artists worked with local people and activists to “design special shoe soles that left personalised slogans and symbols as participants trespassed on the then off-limits sand on their legendary beaches” (Kastner 2006, 28). In projects like these and especially the sprawling interdisciplinary artistic operations of organizations like the Centre for Land Use Interpretation CLUI, the disrupted moment for which Smithson advocated – of collapsed boundaries; of the harnessing of new technology to condition belief and behaviour; of research and education as elements of artistic practice; of artists and collectives engaged in the creation of ‘a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists’, and ‘based on relationships to specific sites of time’ (Smithson 1973) is relevant in the contemporary 21st century.

As a final statement I will refer to Mathew Coolidge from the Centre for Land Use Interpretation CLUI; “...one of the things we ... try and suggest with the database and the exhibits though, is that the landscape is fairly rich as it is and, in a way, you don’t need to do too much to it other than change your perspective – shift your point of

view a bit – and the familiar objects, which are often unseen because they're so familiar, become more interesting. I think the existing landscape is almost infinitely rich if you change the way you look at it.' (Conversation with Matthew Coolidge and Kastner 4-5 May 2005 cited in Kastner 2006). [my bold]

In my paper I would say 'almost' is not necessary and the items, soil, the things returning are a natural part of the land to be enjoyed for what they are. One of the engaging questions for artists is how to make use of an idea and visualise this for others. It is a challenge to be creative, to keep coming up with ideas that can be of interest to others, to provide a response to the issues of today. But often it is the past conceptions of what art should be or what we should be that gets in the way of engaging with the meaningful issues that could be addressed by artists in centres for art and ecology. Lucy Lippard (2006) also questions how we escape the frame and the preconceived notions of what art is. In this paper I aimed to expose and discuss some recent 'environmental' art practice relevant to this area where the boundary becomes increasingly diffused with other disciplines such as ecology and where artists work collaboratively with experts from other disciplines.

The contribution of this paper lies in recognising the ability the community has to address the issues, of resource use and waste management, not at a global level, but at the local level. That is, the voice of artists in collaboration with scientists, and the community about environmental issues and sustainability.

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