

Multidisciplinarity as the New Paradigm

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In 1995, I had the honour -under Yongwoo Lee- to be a Commissioner for the inaugural Kwangju Biennale whose theme was 'Beyond the Borders'. Reading his introductory essay again after 21 years, Yongwoo sets out the importance of mutuality, information and reciprocity, in the context of a City noted for its resistance in the face of oppression and within a divided country. These are all issues that already suggest a multidisciplinary agenda and that the arts were being used to achieve some deeper good; objectives which all chime with my own modest achievements in directing the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World over the past decade.

This short paper goes on to describe ways in which other disciplines have informed our work, in the hope that our experience could inform the Biennial Format.

At Kwangju, I was asked to select work by artists from 8 countries across the Middle East and Africa. In this case, it's interesting to speculate to whom one is accountable. Is it to the citizens of Kwangju, the Director of the Biennale, the countries from which one is selecting artists, to the art world, or simply that one is accountable to no one else than yourself? It's a puzzling business and I visited each country to discuss the selection alongside artists, curators and collectors as I travelled.

I won't dwell on what was a hugely stimulating experience, but only to mention that one had the freedom to select an artist such as Nadim Karam from Lebanon, a country which had suffered hugely in war. To show the work of a Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah alongside Guy Bar-Amotz from Israel. To select Chant Avedissian, an Armenian Christian in a pre-dominately Islamic Egypt, and Pascale Marthine Tayou from Cameroon-an artist whose only experience of the art world was through visits to the library of the Institute Francaise in Yaounde. (my selection also included several wonderful women artists, Selma Gurbuz from Turkey, Ikram Kabbaj from Morocco and Penny Siopis from South Africa).

Long before working for Kwangju, I had curated the exhibition programme at

Arnolfini/Bristol in the Seventies, directed Mostyn Art Gallery in Wales and managed a private gallery in London in the Eighties before becoming an independent curator. During that time, my greatest interest was in the work of artists which engaged with nature, reflected in exhibitions of Jan Dibbets, Richard Long, Robert Smithson, David Nash and Andy Goldsworthy. But I also organised several major exhibitions on the history of British landscape painting.

After Kwangju in 1995, I became more concerned with environmental issues and, I suppose, increasingly disillusioned by the direction taken by Britart and its subsequent commodification. After several false starts (Yongwoo knows of these), CCANW opened a project space in 2006 in a forest near Exeter.

Until 2013 we ran a programme of exhibitions and activities which ranged from exploring our sentiments towards forests and the use of timber in architecture to eco-fashion, and the work of the Harrisons -whose practice included extensive research in the study of ecosystems.

Our mission was -and is- focused on exploring new understandings of our place within Nature through the Arts, in order to provide insights into today's environmental and social challenges. And to encourage a new generation of artists and curators to engage with ecological issues.

Our hope is to affect people by focusing not only on the Arts as object-led expressions of individual vision but as a new ideas-led process of creating interaction between peoples and disciplines, as a means of raising eco-consciousness. We believe that using the Arts in this way can kindle the imagination, open minds to new creative possibilities and encourage grassroots activism in ways that conventional science and advocacy often struggles to do.

Between 2013-5 we left the forest and based ourselves at the University of Exeter, creating partnerships with other galleries and organisations over a new programme called 'Soil Culture'. Partnership working and cooperation have since become our most useful tools in the face of financial challenges.

Soil Culture was linked to the UN International Year of Soils, and involved academic research, artist residencies, activities and exhibitions. The residencies alone attracted

655 applications from 39 different countries and took place across South West England and at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, resulting in a touring exhibition 'Young Shoots'.

A second exhibition 'Deep Roots' included work by several established international artists including work by Mel Chin who used hyper-accumulator plants to extract heavy metals from contaminated land and Claire Pentecost, who fashioned soil into ingots; a reflection on its true worth.

To achieve our mission with any authority, we needed to embrace multidisciplinary considerations at every turn. Also, to establish academic partnerships, as we did with Oxford Brookes University over the University of the Trees -a project that took forward the social sculpture strategies embedded in Beuys' 'expanded conception of art'.

These disciplines have ranged from science, history, philosophy to anthropology.

From science, we learn that healthy soils (far from being 'dirt' as they are called in America) are not only essential for the production of food, fibres and fuel for a growing world population, but are also a vital part of our global ecosystem, acting as a carbon sink to reduce the impact of climate change. Several of our artist residencies were based in scientific institutes and their work helped communicate quite complex research to a general public.

From history, we also know that whenever civilisations come under stress from environmental and social change new forms of expression tend to evolve. In the Sixties, when the world was first becoming more aware of the fragility of our planet, I am thinking of the emergence of Land Art, minimalism, conceptual art and arte povera. In the years leading up to the Millennium, when we were become increasingly concerned about climate change, new genetic technologies, species depletion, and over-population, - the emergence of Eco-art, Bio-art and Sci-art.

From philosophy, we learn that the 3 main meanings of what we understand by 'nature' are distinct yet interwoven. Firstly, its lay or everyday meaning- the world of aesthetic experience. Secondly, its scientific meaning- an understanding of biological activity and thirdly its metaphysical or social concept through which humanity

imagines difference.

Whilst the first 2 meanings are well understood..we have a subjective appreciation of what we find beautiful..we have an objective understanding of the science behind the environmental challenges, but we struggle to understand our biological natures- 'human nature' if you like.

Why should that matter? Well, just as Descartes' distinction of humanity from other species provided an analogue for the subjugation of other races, since Darwin, an emphasis on competition and selfishness has contributed to some of the difficulties we face today.

From new studies in anthropology we learn that organisms are as cooperative as they are competitive, as altruistic as they are selfish and as creative as they are destructive. We therefore urgently need to rethink our biological natures in order to reach a more harmonious relationship with each other, with other species and the rest of nature. We can easily compile a list of problems that face us today- fraud, bribery, cheating, corruption, intolerance, discrimination and, of course, terrorism.

In past CCANW programmes, such as 'The Animal Gaze' we explored how artists used animal imagery to make statements about human identity. 'Games People Play', our contribution to the Cultural Olympiad in 2012, showed how artists use photography of sporting subjects to make some wider comment on the human condition-for example our obsession with competitive sport, territorial control and attachment to the team (nation or religion).

We only have to look at events since that 1995 Kwangju Biennale, 9-11, wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria and the present terrorist threat, to see that human nature is as much a threat in the world today as climate change.

Is the problem with achieving multidisciplinary practice that we specialise too much and too early? Just before I left England an artist from Germany wrote to me, describing himself as having studied fine art, medicine and philosophy and had a PhD in neuroscience! Maybe a good sign!

Of course, there are other 'arts and ecology' organisations doing great work in the UK. Platform London have campaigned against oil pollution in the Niger Delta and arts

sponsorship by BP. Cape Farewell leads expeditions to the Arctic bringing education, science and the arts together. Tipping Point works with scientists to engage artists with the challenge of climate change and Julie's Bicycle works across the creative industries to make environmental sustainability a core component of their operations.

Although Julie's Bicycle or their associates have not yet given advice on Biennales, there is a plenty of general guidance to draw upon in their publications. A report commissioned by Frieze Art Fair lists the impacts that need to be considered-carbon emissions, energy consumption and origin, material use, transport, waste, recycling and water management.

Last November 'Creative Responses to Sustainability' guides to Korea and Singapore were presented in Gwangju at the Asia-Europe Foundation's Public Forum on Creative Cities. The guide featured a directory of the most pioneering cultural organisations in Korea contributing to social and environmental change through their artistic practice.

Alongside the Gwangju Biennale is an entry on the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale organised by the Yattoo group of artists in Gongju-which is where I was a week or so ago. Founded in 1981, Yattoo has organised its own Biennale since 2004 and has been hosting international residencies since 2009. Its latest programme, the Global Nomadic Art Project-based on the idea that 'nature has no borders' -started 2 years ago. Last year it took place in India, this year in South Africa and Iran.

Yattoo has also been working with the National Institute of Science and Technology in Ulsan on the Science Walden Project, and Yattoo and ourselves have last week signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work together with the Korea Environment Institute. Naturally, I would welcome making similar links in China and other countries.

This year, CCANW has itself been on the move again, having taken up an invitation to move to the Dartington Hall Estate in Devon (set up by the same family that established the Whitney Museum), where we are working to set up a new family of arts and ecology organisations, combining learning and research with programmes delivered within new international partnerships.

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