

# CCANW

## Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World

### **Nature and I are Two: Reconnecting People with the Planet**

**by Clive Adams**

Many people have observed that when civilizations begin to undergo turbulent change – as in Hellenistic Greece, medieval Japan and Europe at the time of industrial and political revolution – there seems to be a need for new forms of expression to evolve in order to make sense of a changing relationship between nature and society. The start of a new Millennium, marked by a convergence of concern over species depletion, new genetic technologies, BSE, foot and mouth and AIDS epidemics, global warming and the prospect of post-agricultural areas of Britain might not be such a bad time to set up the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, for society and the arts to look anew at our relationship to nature.

So, I'd like to start by examining what, in the context of our proposed Centre, we mean by 'the natural world'; what is this 'nature' we are referring to and how is it linked to the social and environmental art practices that form the subject of this talk? Before we turn to nature, however, I'd like to talk a little about the terms 'landscape' and 'environment'.

In both China and Europe, the art of landscape painting evolved with the growth of cities and wealth. Landscape paintings were as intrinsic to society's values as were the artworks made by the hunters-and-gatherers and early agriculturalists. The first landscape paintings appeared in Rome during the first century B.C. during a period of environmental stress: the over-cultivation of land and deforestation. Such murals gave the impression of being surrounded by pleasant groves when, in reality, none existed.

During the seventeenth century, Claude and Poussin offered an Arcadian vision of nature, as a form of solace in an increasingly complex world. The appreciation of rural scenery by the aesthete in the eighteenth depended on an acquaintance with the tradition of European painting: rural scenery only merited being called a 'landscape' when it was reminiscent of a painted 'landskip', and 'picturesque' when it looked like a picture. The word 'landscape' itself only entered the English language at the end of the sixteenth century with reference to Dutch 'landskip' painting rather than the land itself.

The geographer, Denis Cosgrove associates the evolution of the concept of 'landscape' with early modern capitalism and the relinquishing of feudal systems of land tenure. According to his argument, those for whom land is the fabric of their lives, for whom it is livelihood and home environment, do not see that land

as landscape. They relate to the land as 'insiders'. For the insider there is no clear separation of self from scene, subject from object. The insider does not enjoy the privilege of being able to walk away from the scene as we can walk away from a framed picture or from a tourist viewpoint.

In his book 'Landscape and Western Art', Malcolm Andrews concludes that it is difficult to escape the feeling that we are all 'insiders' now, alarmingly aware of the finiteness of the natural resources we used to take for granted as Nature's endless bounty. We don't have to imagine, with the aid of alluring images of Arcadian natural simplicity, what it must have been like to live *in* Nature; we are all too aware of our dependency on Nature now. More crucially still, we feel Nature's dependency on us. Landscape as a way of seeing from a distance is incompatible with this heightened sense of our relationship to Nature as living (or dying) environment. As a phase in the cultural life of the West, landscape may already be over.

Holmes Rolston writes of a similar difficulty we have when we speak of 'the environment'. For 'the' environment objectifies environment: it turns it into an entity that we can think of and deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves . . . . *'The' environment is one of the last survivors of the mind-body dualism. . . . For there is no outside world. Person and environment are continuous.* Environments are horizons that we carry about and reconstitute as we move here and there. Objectively, there are no horizons in nature.

So, we turn to the term 'nature' itself whose meanings are complex and, used loosely, lead to confusion. 'Nature' is a difficult word either to use or to avoid. Its origin lies in the Latin 'natus' or 'gnatus' being born or produced, roots that survive in 'pregnant', 'genesis' and 'native'. The meanings given of this crucial term by the Greeks – through Roman antiquity, the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Enlightenment to the present – have been many. In our century, Lovejoy and Boas, in 'Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity' (1935) list sixty-six. But the philosopher Kate Soper can help us look at 'nature' in three chief ways.

Firstly, we can look at nature as a metaphysical concept through which humanity imagines difference. This concept questions humanity's relationship to nature and our changing perception of what is 'human' and 'cultural'. In this sense I think of 'nature' as a social concept involving issues of equality; what is 'natural' or perhaps 'normal'; how prejudice, exclusion and discrimination in society on account of race, gender and sexuality originate. Such issues are essentially matters of how we construct our ideas of 'human nature'; how we are partial in our modelling of human behaviour on those of other species in order to reinforce particular attitudes in society.

Secondly, nature as a 'realist' concept which refers to the structures, processes and powers that operate in the world. This concept is of a nature to whose laws and processes we are subject, even though we harness them for human purposes. In this sense I think of 'nature' as being largely a scientific concept involving the particular laws and processes that are the basis of all biological and technological activity. Such issues as genetic engineering, BSE and AIDS epidemics, carbon dioxide emissions leading to global warming all lead to society's questioning of the authority of science and the modernist idea of 'progress'.

Lastly, nature as a 'lay' concept as it is generally used in everyday discussion. This is the nature of immediate experience and aesthetic appreciation, of 'landscape', 'wilderness' and the 'countryside' as opposed to the urban environment. In this sense, 'nature' is largely an environmental concept which speaks of how it is being destroyed and which we are asked to conserve, even though its form may have originally

been partly or wholly the result of human activity. Exploitation, wastage, pollution, species depletion and the decline in local agriculture are all current issues that arise from this concern. These concepts interlock in complex ways and the distinction between them is essentially between several layers of the same whole.

Personally, I agree with the eco-philosopher David Rothenberg when he writes: *It is the idea of nature independent of humanity which is fading, which needs to be replaced by a nature that includes us, which we can only understand to the extent that we can find a home in the enveloping flow of forces which is only ever partially in our control . . . There is no such thing as pure, wild nature, empty of human conception . . . Wilderness is a consequence only of a civilisation that sees itself as detached from nature . . . . This is a romantic, exclusive and only-human concept of nature pure and untrammelled by human presence. It is this idea of nature which is reaching the end of its useful life.*

Since the Sixties and the beginning of the land and environmental art movements, artists and designers of all kinds have become increasingly engaged in a critical reassessment of the relationship between nature and society and been influenced by other cultures, religions, philosophical concepts and the scientific and technological revolution.

Let's now turn to work that illustrates the different ways that the arts respond to 'nature'. Of course, here, I don't include literature, music, dance.

Firstly, artists and designers have long been influenced by colours, textures, patterns, structures and systems in nature and in the theories underlying the natural world. The design of this interchange at Lyon station by Santiago Calatrava, this fabric by Rebecca Earley, (made from recycled plastic bottles), this staircase by Eva Jiricna, (shaped like DNA spiral) and Peter Randall-Page's sculpture 'Fruit of Mythological Trees' are some examples.

Then, we have artists that add, remove or displace local natural materials to create a form of sculpture, in actuality or by photographic means. This earthwork in Washington by Herbert Bayer, Andy Goldsworthy's sculpture at the North Pole and the Roden crater, Arizona by James Turrell are all examples of this.

Artists also use manufactured structures and technology to frame or harness elements of the landscape, this especially includes work by the American land artists, such as Walter de Maria's 'Lightning Field' in New Mexico, Christo's 'Running Fence' in California, 'Skyspace' by James Turrell at the Israel Museum.

They also cultivate a one-to-one relationship with the land, by using their bodies, by making ephemeral gestures or by making documentation of their journeys. Examples of this are Richard Long's circle made of powdered snow in Lapland and Ana Mendieta's work from 'Tree of Life' series.

Others investigate the concept of nature in language, history and present-day culture. Ian Hamilton Finlay's lithograph demonstrates the influence of Jean Jacques Rousseau on politics and gardening. It reads; *Both the garden style called 'sentimental', and the French Revolution, grew from Rousseau. The garden trellis, and the guillotine, are alike entwined with the honeysuckle of the new sensibility.* Lois Weinberger's video 'As Ever' suggests a sense of the urban wilderness.

Finally, we have artists, designers and architects that explore, expose and try to find strategies to remedy the exploitation, waste, pollution of nature through direct social or political action and sustainable design. Joseph Beuys' action of sweeping with a red broom in E. Berlin in 1972 suggests that a creatively engaged street cleaner, a crucial player in society, is more of an artist than a painter making naïve imagery with no genuine or innovative impulse behind it. Agnes Denes, who planted and harvested a wheatfield in Battery Park landfill site NY, writes; *I believe that the new role of the artist is to create art that is more than decoration, commodity, or political tool – an art that questions the status quo and the direction life has taken.* Mel Chin used plants to revive a landfill site, polluted by zinc and cadmium in St Paul, Minnesota and Viet Ngo used aquatic plants to treat waste water in Nevada.

Just as the *avant garde* has abandoned naïve imagery of a romantic idealized notion of nature, since the Sixties the advertising industry has increasingly adopted a strategy of association with nature. So now we see another cycle: of artists making critiques of consumerism, parodying advertising techniques: the American artist Jenny Holzer from 'Survival Series', Barbara Kruger 'Endangered Species' and in Grizedale in the Lake District – whose forests are decidedly 'unnatural' – Marcus Coates in 'wild animal and den', expressing the difficulty of a 'return to nature'; what we might call an ironic, post-modern and, on the surface at least, non-nature endorsing statement.

This has already brought us some way from designs informed by nature and from the contemporary earthworks we first looked at and so this might be the time to look at how the work of twentieth century artists addresses agricultural issues in an exhibition I curated a couple of years ago – 'Love, Labour and Loss'

At the end of the worst outbreak of foot and mouth disease Britain had seen, I was invited by Carlisle City Council to curate an exhibition to help regenerate tourism during the following summer and to lift the spirits of the community. Quite quickly, it became clear that the exhibition should address the very subject - British livestock farming – that had been so recently devastated and that its history over 300 years should be explored through art in order to better understand the changing attitudes and practices that had led to the current crisis. Ways and means were then found to enable this exhibition 'Love, Labour and Loss' to travel to Exeter, so that it was seen in the two counties, Cumbria and Devon, worst affected by the epidemic.

One of the main purposes of this exhibition and its catalogue essays was to draw together some of the artistic, agricultural and social themes from the past and show how they become interwoven in the twentieth century.

In my own catalogue essay, I looked at how artists have adopted a plurality of approaches in the twentieth century, from re-awakening a sense of the pastoral ideal and framing our national identity, to the advent of environmental art. In the final part of the exhibition the perseverance of past landscape and pictorial conventions was questioned, arguing that in the period of radical change that is likely to affect the future of the countryside, artists will engage with new ways of working and envisioning our relationship with the land, animals and, ultimately, with each other.

The beginnings of a Modern Movement in British painting at the start of the twentieth century replaced the Victorian preoccupation with realism by a new understanding of abstract form, colour theory and

structure in art. Painting was recognised as a language of signs rather than an imitation of appearances. Post-Impressionism – Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne – shown in London in 1910 and 1912 had a strong impact on artists such as Robert Bevan and Spencer Gore. After the Great War there was a revival of interest in landscape and painters such as Allan Gwynne-Jones, Ben and Winifred Nicholson hurried to isolated spots in search of the ‘spirit of the place’. In Cookham’s fields, river and farms, Stanley Spencer may have seen Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land, but he also recognised the quality of animality he shared with other creatures.

In his book ‘The Killing of the Countryside’, Graham Harvey describes how, for much of the first half of this century Britain followed a pattern of farming based on the rotation principle (a process, if you like) that not only allowed wild species to flourish, but positively nurtured them. As the 1930s progressed, the danger of a second world war led to farming incentives and subsidies and with the declaration of war in 1939, government involvement in farming became total. From now on agriculture was to be a publicly managed industry less to do with process, rotations and sustainability than with production and outputs. Artists such as Frank Newbould and Evelyn Dunbar were commissioned as artists to design recruitment posters and to paint the war effort on the land.

State involvement did not end with the coming of peace. The 1947 Agriculture Act essentially provided ‘guaranteed prices and assured markets’ and was quickly followed by measures to extend the ploughing-up subsidy and to provide capital grants for hill farmers. Later, there were subsidies on fertiliser use and on beef calves. Essentially, it would be public funding that was to change for ever the look – and the life – of the British landscape.

By the early 1960s, the first damaging effects of insecticides and nitrogen fertilisers on the environment as a result of Britain’s post-war farming policies were being felt. By the 1980s, Britain’s wildlife and countryside had already fallen into steep decline. Cornish meadows, such as those painted by Harold Harvey almost a hundred years ago, became ‘exceptionally rare’.

Over the past decade, artists have increasingly drawn on symbolic ideas involving animals: the immediate subject of those ideas being not the animal itself, but rather the artist using animal imagery to make a statement about human identity. In the work in this exhibition Damien Hirst sliced a calf in half, preserving each side in two tanks of formaldehyde and presenting them as a walk-through sculpture. Flattened against glass walls, each animal’s interior was revealed as fascinating rather than repellent, making us reconsider the links between the meat that we eat and the quality of animality that we share. Sam Taylor-Wood’s recent photographs have explored the psychological and emotional links between animals and her own fight against cancer. ‘Poor Cow’, photographed just before the foot and mouth outbreak, stares out at us in its loneliness from a dismal, flat field.

Artists’ use of new technology can help us to visualise the empathy we feel to animals, rather than the fear that keeps us apart. John Berger, in ‘Why look at animals?’, the opening piece in his 1980 collection ‘About Looking’ writes about an absence of contact which is epitomized by the pathos of an unrecognising, imperfectly-met gaze, *The animal scrutinizes him [man] across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss.* In Nicky Coutts’ series ‘The Inheritors’ photographs of human eyes (the artist’s own) have been merged into the found images of

the heads of animals using digital scanning technology. Although, on the surface, these hybrids appear to be some cobbled feat of advanced genetic engineering, the work dwells on feelings of connection rather than separation in the relationship between humans and other species. The latest visualising technology can also allow us to look into minute, previously unseen, worlds. Daro Montag who has used micro-organisms to create large photographic prints in the past, has created a new work for this exhibition which makes visible the activities of the foot and mouth virus.

The recent trauma of foot and mouth also seems likely to become a watershed, forcing farming policy to return to first principles. A recent Government commission concluded that England's farming and food industry today is unsustainable, in every sense. Whatever solutions are suggested – and there will be many - our challenge today is how to reconcile the physical requirements of civilization with the new feelings that our culture has generated, and to close the gap between modern, individual self-fulfillment and the general responsibility for future generations.

Against this background, ecology – particularly a concern for process rather than production and appearance - denotes a cultural change marking artists and art in just the same way as farmers and politicians. As Suzi Gablik writes; *There is a need for new forms emphasising our essential interconnectedness rather than our separateness, forms evoking the feelings of belonging to a larger whole rather than expressing the isolated, alienated self. . . . Exalted individualism, for example, is hardly a creative response to the needs of the planet at this time, which demand complex and sensitive forms of interaction and linking.*

[Clive Adams then outlined the development of the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World over the past 10 years and talked about the opening in Spring 2006 of its Project Space in the Haldon Forest Park near Exeter – all this information can be found on the website [www.ccanw.co.uk](http://www.ccanw.co.uk) ]

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