

# On the nature of Nature and Art

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Many people have observed that when civilisations 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.

In the 1960s, political and social changes encouraged artists to address nature in just such new ways. The destruction of habitats worldwide and the deteriorating condition of urban life also triggered a new wave of activism and environmental awareness. For some, painting landscapes as a 'way of seeing' seemed increasingly incompatible with a new sense of our relationship with the Earth seen from space.

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 an approach of using art as a powerful instrument of social and environmental consciousness, 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.

The start of a new Millennium, marked by a convergence of concern over species depletion, population growth, new genetic technologies, the AIDS epidemic and global warming seemed to me not 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.

I'd like to start by examining what, in the context of our 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? '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, epidemics, carbon dioxide emissions leading to climate change 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.*

The Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) explores new understandings of our place within Nature through the Arts. Our aim is to use the Arts to provide valuable insights into today's pressing environmental and social challenges. In particular, to help people appreciate the importance of their everyday surroundings and the resources that they often take for granted or otherwise abuse.

CCANW hopes 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 people and disciplines, and as a means of raising eco-consciousness. Using the Arts in this way can kindle the imagination, open minds to new creative possibilities and encourage grassroots activism in ways that conventional advocacy often struggles to do.

Between 2006-13, we operated from a gallery in Haldon Forest Park near the city of Exeter in South West England. Regularly funded by Arts Council England, we attracted around 40,000 visitors a year

with a programme that ranged from promoting the use of local timber in architecture and eco-fashion, to exhibition of the work of leading artists such as the Harrisons and Lucy Orta.

The last programme 'Games People Play' was part of last year's Cultural Olympics and was presented in two parts. The first dealt with board and computer games, the second with photography and videos.

Games can tell us a great deal about human nature, and a deeper understanding of the advantages of cooperation can help us all to address the needs of the planet at this time. The arts can offer unique insights into these issues and in previous programmes with which CCANW has been involved, such as 'The Animal Gaze', we have explored how artists have used animal imagery to make statements about human identity.

Just as Descartes' distinction of man from the beasts provided an analogue for the subjugation of other races, women and the poor, since Hobbes we have tended to project the predatory instincts of other animals on to human society, on the grounds that they are somehow more 'natural'. Unfortunately, Tennyson's reference to a 'Nature, red in tooth and claw' has flavoured our sense of what Darwin actually meant which was simply, and most reasonably, that those species which best adapted to challenges would be the most likely to survive. Darwin believed that mutualism between species must be explained by the indirect benefits to the individuals performing cooperative acts.

Today, science questions the wisdom of establishing models of social behaviour based on an incomplete understanding of nature. The biologist Richard Dawkins maintains that, although our genes are basically 'selfish', it can suit their own self-interest to adopt strategies of both altruism and cooperation.

One might blame interpretations of Darwinism, with its apparent emphasis on competition, inheritance and selfishness as having contributed to some of the difficulties we now face, such as environmental deterioration and loss of communal values. Organisms are as cooperative as they are competitive, as altruistic as they are selfish and as creative as they are destructive, and we urgently need to rethink our biological natures in order to reach a more balanced relationship with each other, other species and the environment.

The psychiatrist Eric Berne maintained that during most of our social lives we are playing games; and by this, writing 'Games People Play' in the Sixties, he obviously does not mean video games. Sometimes, to get our way, we compete, sometimes we cooperate. Such games are necessary and desirable, but we need to be more aware of the strategies we employ every day; when these games operate at an unthinking level they can be harmful to others and to society.

Board games can be categorised as race games such as Senet, Ur and Pachisi, war games such as Chess and counting games. In Leela, played in India from the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a Hindu guide to salvation, the ladders represent virtues such as generosity, faith and humility, and the snakes represent vices such as lust, anger and theft. The aim of the game was for the player to attain

salvation (Moksha) through performing good deeds, whereas by doing evil ones they would be reborn in lower forms of life (Patamu). The number of ladders was less than the number of snakes, as a reminder that treading the path of good was more difficult than that of following the path of sin. Impressed by the ideals behind the game, it was introduced to Victorian England in 1892 as Snakes and Ladders.

Photography and video by contemporary artists now use sporting imagery to make wider comments on the human condition. Here, we see artists exploring the entire range of human emotions in sport, from confidence to anxiety, triumph to despair. Also, the idea of territorial control, attachment to a team, the cult of fitness and youth, and the winning of prizes.

Today's computer and video gamers abandon reality in favour of simulated, competitive and often violent, virtual environments. The statistics surrounding the massive amount of effort and energy that is lavished on gaming are staggering. We are fast becoming a society in which a substantial portion of our population devotes its greatest effort to playing games.

Some artists subvert the iconography of such games, but game worlds are clearly fulfilling genuine human needs that the real world cannot satisfy. The question that some are now asking is how to turn the obvious power of games from wasteful escapism to tackle real social and environmental challenges, just as those early board games were intended to teach us how to live virtuous lives.

Games developers know better than anyone how to inspire extreme effort and reward hard work, and to facilitate cooperation and collaboration on a previously unimaginable scale. Already crowd sourcing games have engaged tens of thousands of players to tackle real world problems for free. 'Evoke', for example, is a social network game produced for the World Bank and initially targeted at Africa, playable on both computers and mobile phones, and designed to help players launch their own world-changing ventures. Others include 'Superstruct', a future forecasting game created by the Institute for the Future, 'Free Rice' for UN World Food Programme, 'World Without Oil' and 'Spore'.

As I mentioned, new forms of creativity tend to evolve at times of environmental and social stress, whether they are the first landscapes painted on the walls of Roman villas during the first century BC or games played in Greece even earlier. Although certainly not the only way forward, it could be that this new generation of video games will provide the 'complex and sensitive form of interaction and linking' of which Suzi Gablik writes and which will evoke 'feelings of belonging to a larger whole rather than experiencing the isolated, alienated self'.

Since moving to the University of Exeter earlier this year, CCANW has been working on two major projects, both largely developed in collaboration with Falmouth University's Research in Art, Nature and Environment group, led by Dr. Daro Montag, who also runs an MA in Art and Environment. The first is 'Soil Culture', a three year programme of research, artists residencies and touring exhibitions which will include work by both emerging and established artists focussed on the importance of soil, a resource on which the whole of civilisation depends.

The second is the research and development over one year of a new, comprehensive world-wide digital platform - a network of networks - which will act as a resource for the art and ecology movement and encourage new opportunities for artists to engage with the important environmental and social challenges we face today.

Soil is not a particularly sexy topic and unfortunately captures little of the kind of public interest seen in, say, the conservation of 'charismatic megafauna' such as the giant panda or humpback whale. However, the importance of healthy soil to feed a growing population and act as a carbon sink is crucial. The challenges, many related to climate change and loss of biodiversity, include forms of degradation including erosion, flooding, reliance on fertilisers, contamination and salination.

The linking of the words 'soil' and 'culture' may seem strange, but it should be remembered that the word 'culture' was originally used in the 'agri-cultural' sense and it was only from the 16th Century that it increasingly came to be used figuratively; as the soil was improved by tillage, so the mind was improved by education and the arts. 'Artspeak' also affected the way we look at the land itself: for the aesthete in the 18th Century, rural scenery – which for many was both livelihood and home environment – only merited being called 'picturesque' or even a 'landscape' when it conformed to a painterly sense of composition.

From our new base, a programme of 'Soil Culture' artist residencies will be launched next year and a touring exhibition developed, showing work by the numerous established international artists who have created soil-related works over the years. The work will range from Mel Chin's art-science projects which use plants to draw heavy metals from polluted soil, to herman de vries' drawings which are made as rubbings from earth samples collected around the world.