

Festival for the Earth, Venice 2016

Multi-disciplinary as the New Paradigm

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In 1995, I had the honour to be a Commissioner -not for the Venice Biennale- but for the inaugural Kwangju Biennale in South Korea whose theme was 'Beyond the Borders'. In preparation for a talk I gave recently in Shanghai I read again the introductory essays in which the importance of reconciliation to a divided country was all too evident. But, of course, equally important was an emerging tendency for multi-disciplinary working, particularly between the arts and sciences. Put simply, borders of different kinds were being broken down to achieve some deeper social 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 describes ways in which other disciplines have informed our work.

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,

CCANW opened a project space in 2006 in a forest near Exeter.

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.

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.

Since we are in Venice rather than Korea, we might start by looking at a programme we delivered in 2009 'Reflections on Water' but also view work by more artists engaged with water related issues:

Susan Derges large scale photograms made under the surface of a river help us to contemplate (and to love) the beauty of nature-it's what art has always done well.

Amy Sharrocks 'Museum of Water' make us aware of the presence of water everywhere in the world-including the 60% present in our own bodies.

Gideon Mendall's 'Drowning World' photographs capture the effect of flooding and rising sea levels on poor communities.

Basia Irland's projects along the Rio Grande (a once mighty river that no longer reaches the sea) address the issue of excessive water extraction.

Perhaps most tragic are Chris Jordon's photographs of the effect of plastic waste on seabirds.

Many of these artists work across disciplines and, indeed, artists working within a group or community, or artists working alongside scientists is a growing tendency today. As Suzi Gablik has written 'exalted individualism is hardly a creative response to the needs of the planet at this time'.

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 became the most substantial UK contribution to the UN International Year of Soils, and involved academic research, artist residencies, activities and exhibitions. Soils play a vitally important role in food production, in the sequestration of carbon, and in the filtration and retention of water, but are today threatened by erosion, contamination, compaction and a loss of natural fertility. 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 own 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 and discrimination. The biologist Edward O Wilson puts it this way, ' We have created a Star Wars civilization, with Stone Age emotions': currently being played out in the American elections today.

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. A few days ago, I came across a piece written by the environmental lawyer 'Gus' Speth: ' I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy'.

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.

In Korea (where I was again in August) the artist group Yattoo is working with the National Institute of Science and Technology on the Science Walden Project: a laboratory/lavatory turning human waste into energy (yes, you are paid to poo).

This year, CCANW has 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. This is the building we hope to move into soon. Currently, we are holding our own International summit 'Feeding the Insatiable'.