

ART • CLIVE ADAMS

# INTERPRETING THE WORLD

How contemporary artists are translating and transforming their environment.

**T**HROUGHOUT HISTORY, when civilisations become stressed by environmental degradation there is a recurrent need for new art forms to evolve which remind humanity of its connection to the rest of nature and the responsibility it bears to the planet.

The landscapes painted on the walls of Roman villas during the first century BCE gave the impression of being surrounded by pleasant groves, yet were painted during a period of over-cultivation and deforestation. In the 17th century, painters such as Claude and Poussin offered an Arcadian vision of nature, as a form of solace in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. Blake and Turner both attempted to maintain our bond with nature, but our estrangement accelerated during the Industrial Revolution. During years of conflict in the first half of the 20th century, artists in Britain adopted a plurality of approaches to nature, from re-awakening a sense of the 'pastoral' ideal, to helping frame our national identity.

In the 1960s, however, political and social changes encouraged artists to address nature in new ways. The destruction of habitats worldwide and the deteriorating conditions of urban life also triggered a new wave of activism and environmental awareness.

For some artists, painting landscapes as a way of seeing seemed increasingly incompatible with a new sense of our relationship with the Earth as seen from space and through the eyes of different cultures and religions. Artists and designers continued to be influenced by the imagery, colours and textures in nature, but they also sought to work in a way that reflected how nature itself worked. They tried to understand the new

scientific theories and processes underlying the natural world. This approach can also be traced in the recent history of literature, film, dance/movement, music/sound, performance and criticism.

Since that time, artists of all kinds have responded to nature, landscape and the environment in many, often quite different, ways. Not all of them are addressing strictly ecological concerns. Ecology does not seem to

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have been the prime concern of, for example, many of the early American Land Artists. Artists such as Michael Heitzer and Dennis Oppenheim were more concerned with creating earthworks as grandiose forms of abstract sculpture, and Christo with using technology and manufactured structures to dominate the landscape.

The problem with such work was that it tended to objectify the environment and turn it into an entity that we can think of and deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves. Far more important, I suggest, is work – such as that of Richard Long and Ana Mendieta – that cultivates a one-to-one relationship with the land, and that looks at art as a process in much

the same way as we look at nature itself.

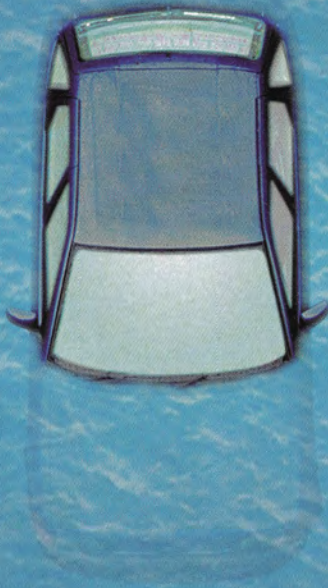
We might define the most profound form of ecological, socially engaged art, design or architecture to be that which explores, exposes and tries to find strategies to remedy the exploitation, waste and pollution of nature through direct action and sustainable design. The teaching and practice of Joseph Beuys encapsulated this approach, but artists as diverse as Agnes Denes and Barbara Kruger 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.

Work that is most specifically ecological might be described as, for example, transforming damaged habitats or sterile urban sites into life-generating places. Mel Chin's and Viet Ngo's use of plants to revive polluted landfill sites and treat wastewater are perfect examples of this approach.

The publication *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*, produced to accompany an exhibition in Cincinnati in 2002, provides a good analysis of ecological art – albeit with a US emphasis – of projects by such artists as Helen and Newton Harrison, Alan Sonfist, Hans Haacke and Basia Irland. In Britain, groups such as PLATFORM, Common Ground and Helix Arts are among those that have made important contributions to art and ecology over many years.

TODAY WE ARE faced with a convergence of environmental concerns. The Greek root of the word 'ecology' means 'home' and for many, as Suzi Gablik has written, that's a hard place to find these days. By pursuing production and the capitalist idea of 'progress' at the expense of sustain-





**Come Hell or High Water**, a proposed intervention by Michael Pinsky on the River Tyne COURTESY: MICHAEL PINSKY/HELIX ARTS/[www.ClimateChange-CulturalChange.com](http://www.ClimateChange-CulturalChange.com)

ability and a concern for process, we have lost connection within both our local communities and our global home.

The important contribution that the mainstream arts can play in addressing these issues seems finally to have become appreciated and acted upon in the past few years. The Royal Society of Arts has launched its Arts and Ecology programme and the South-West – Devon, in particular – is fast becoming the UK centre for a number of important new courses attracting students to study the subject. Bicton College and the University of Plymouth offer the first Foundation Degree in Environmental Arts and

Crafts, University College Falmouth has its Research in Art, Nature and Environment (RANE) group, Schumacher College offers short courses in Art and Ecology, and Dartington College will start an important new MA course in September 2006.

After ten years of effort, the first phase of the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) opened in the Haldon Forest Park near Exeter in January 2006. This phase involved the creation of a Project Space by recycling a redundant building at the 'Gateway' to the Forest and is part of a new partnership with the Forestry Commission. The next phase will involve the making of an architect-

designed timber eco-building.

These recent developments and CCANW's partnership will all bring tremendous opportunities to engage new audiences, participants and collaborations – both local and global – in programmes of artist-led projects, exhibitions and educational activities that will reach out, across the art forms and other disciplines, to develop new understandings of our connection and responsibilities to nature in the modern world. ●

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<[www.ccanw.co.uk](http://www.ccanw.co.uk)> and  
<[www.greenmuseum.org](http://www.greenmuseum.org)>