

SCULPTING NATURE

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Whenever civilisations come under stress from environmental and social change, new forms of expression tend to evolve in order to provide new understandings of our place within nature. This was never so true as in the Sixties—a decade which led to the genesis of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. For many artists, painting landscapes or fabricating abstract metal sculptures suddenly seemed incompatible with a sense of the Earth's fragility seen from Space

At Arnolfini/Bristol in 1975, I first showed the work of Richard Long and also Jan Dibbets. Like several fellow students at St.Martin's in the late Sixties (including Gilbert and George), Long had reacted to the industrial metal assemblage approach to sculpture promoted by his tutor Anthony Caro. A student work 'A Line Made by Walking' (1967) incorporated elements of ritual, landscape and impermanence within a simple black and white photograph. His originality lies in the idea of 'making a new art which was also a new way of walking: walking as art'. We must remember that both Long and Dibbets' work emerged at a time when minimalism, conceptual art and arte povera were important movements, alongside Earth Art and Land Art (terms attributed to Smithson) which were largely American-led phenomena. It's interesting to note how much closer Heizer's work is to that of Caro, than it is to that of Long.

As Director of Mostyn Art Gallery from 1979, I hosted an exhibition of Smithson's drawings, and curated several exhibitions of a next generation of British artists whose work engaged with the natural world, notably David Nash. From David Nash I learned of the work of Andy

Goldsworthy, whose early career I then helped to develop, having started to manage a private gallery in London in the mid-Eighties. This is a work Andy made at the North Pole at around that time.

During the Nineties, I worked both as an independent curator and an art dealer, for some of that time developing the career of sculptor Peter Randall-Page (this is a sculpture made for an a small island in the River Teign).

In the years leading up to the Millennium, the world had become increasingly concerned with specific environmental and social challenges including genetic engineering, species depletion and over-population, but-most of all- climate change. My wife Jill and I became convinced of the need to establish the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, in the belief that the arts could raise eco-consciousness in ways that science and conventional advocacy often fails and that we had a responsibility to encourage emerging artists to engage with ecological issues.

The Centre was established as a charity and between 2006-13 operated from a timber building in the Haldon Forest near Exeter. From the start it was supported by the Arts Council and attracted around 40,000 visitors a year. Its programme of exhibitions and activities ranged from exploring our sentiments towards forests, promoting the use of local timber in architecture to eco-fashion. Several academic partnerships were established, notably with Oxford Brookes University over the 'University of the Trees' (inspired by Joseph Beuys concept of 'social sculpture') and with Manchester and Sheffield Universities over 'Greenhouse Britain', featuring the work of the eminent ecological artists the Harrisons.

In 2013, it moved to the campus of the University of Exeter where we

programmed a small gallery and adopted a new strategy of delivering its exhibitions and activities in partnership with other galleries and organisations. Since then, 'Soil Culture' has developed into a three year programme of research, artist residencies and touring exhibitions focussed on the importance of soil, becoming the UK's most significant contribution to last year's UN International Year of Soils. 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. Nine artist residencies attracted 655 applications from 39 different countries; a strong indication of the increasing number of artists becoming engaged with environmental issues.

The residencies were held in a wide range of organisations, each of which set its own brief. These ranged from the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew (where the artists Something and Son set out to manufacture soil in 10 days) to the Eden Project in Cornwall, environmental institutes and organic farms. The resulting exhibition 'Young Shoots' then toured, starting in Bristol-then Green Capital of Europe.

A second exhibition 'Deep Roots' showed groups of work by six established International artists, including Mel Chin who used hyper-accumulator plants to extract heavy metals from contaminated land and Claire Pentecost who refashioned soil into ingots to reflect its true worth, and single works by seven British artists.

This year, CCANW has been on the move again, having taken up an invitation to move its main office to the Dartington Hall Estate in Devon, where we soon hope to start a new MA Arts and Ecology course with the aim of creating a dynamic international hub for arts and ecology. We are hoping to base this family at High Cross House, a notable Modernist

building from the 1930s on the Dartington Estate.

This talk is called *Sculpting Nature*, but before we start talking about what we might mean by 'nature', let's explore what we understand by the terms 'landscape' and 'environment' in relation to the arts.

The first paintings that bear resemblance to modern 'landscapes' appeared on the walls of Roman villas during the first century BC at a time of over-cultivation and deforestation, giving the impression of being surrounded by pleasant groves when, in reality, few existed.

In turn, works painted on canvas by the Dutch 'landschap' painters of the seventeenth century gave the impression of looking out from a window over an imagined and idealized scene.

Today, the idea of 'landscape', with its conceptual origins in two dimensional compositional framing, observation from a single elevated viewpoint and a separation between the viewer and the viewed (and from nature itself) seems to me to be incompatible with our heightened sense of place within a living (or dying) world.

We can experience similar difficulty over the word 'environment', from the French 'environ de nous', that is, our surroundings as seen when we the viewer-perform a turn through 360 degrees. As with the term 'landscape', this sets the viewer apart from nature but, moreover, suggests an anthropocentric (mankind-centred) relationship within it. The concept of 'environment' therefore suggests an external world which we can appropriate or consume as if it were outside and independent of

ourselves.

'Nature' is a difficult word either to use or to avoid-which is why it is interesting. Its meanings are complex and, used loosely, lead to much muddle and confusion. As most will know, its origin lies in the Latin 'natus' being born, roots that survive in 'pregnant', 'genesis' and 'native'. But we might now look at just three interlocking meanings of which the philosopher Kate Soper writes in her book 'What is Nature?'

Firstly, let's look at nature as a 'lay' concept as is often used in everyday discussion. This is the nature of immediate experience and aesthetic appreciation, of the beauty of the 'countryside' and loss of the sense of 'wilderness'- a concept which speaks of loss and need of conservation, even though its present form may well have been the result of human activity.

The validity of images of the 'unspoilt' British pastoral landscape, as seen in this wartime poster, must now be questioned as we become increasingly aware of the damage to bio-diversity from sheep farming across many upland parts of Britain.

Secondly, we can look at nature as a concept which refers to the structures, processes and powers that operate in the world. In this sense, 'nature' is largely a scientific concept. Such issues as genetic engineering, viral epidemics and climate change are among those that concern us today. Two of the best books on this subject are 'Art and Science Now' by Stephen Wilson-see the work of Brandon Ballengee showing frogs malformed by pollution and Wim Delvoye 's robotic installation simulating digestion- and 'Bio Art' by William Myers-note Patricia Piccononi's sculptures of life forms that we may some day engineer and Ai Hasegawa's portraits of radically non-traditional forms of

reproduction.

Finally, we might look at nature as a metaphysical concept through which humanity imagines difference. To my mind and it seems to make sense- this suggests 'nature' as a social concept involving issues of how prejudice, exclusion and discrimination in society on account of race, gender and sexuality originate. I'll return to this theme later-it's important.

Let's now turn-in perhaps a rather conventional way- to the way that sculptors-in the widest sense- have engaged with nature and imagine which 'nature' or 'natures' these might be. This will give us a clue as to whether we are talking about Land Art, Earth Art, Eco-Art, Bio-Art, Sci-Art etc. or all five! Already, we might note that not all Land Art is strictly ecological, but most Sci-Art seems to mostly address biological subjects.

Please remember that a creative engagement with nature is not entirely new (stonehenge), and that I am not covering other important contemporary art forms such as literature, music, dance, performance, film and digital media. The work of many architects and designers continue to be inspired by the materials, colours, patterns and structures found in nature and there is a long tradition of sculptors inspired by animal and botanical form.

Before we continue, the mention of Stonehenge reminds me to show a few iconic works from the American Land Artists of the Seventies. They are pretty well know but some may not be familiar to all of you; Herbert Bayer's work in Washington, Michael Heizer's Double Negative, Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, Christo's Running Fence, Walter de Maria's Lightning Field. James Turrell's Roden Crater project, started in 1972, might mark him out as a maximalist, whilst his Skyspaces (rooms made

for sky watching) confirm his minimalism. Another important Cuban American artist, Ana Mendieta, acknowledged that she was more greatly inspired by Richard Long than the grandiose work of her fellow artist countrymen.

Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo-with whose work many will be familiar-also make work in nature but those that are ephemeral are almost always made with the intention of making a photowork. Goldsworthy also makes permanent works which are as ambitious as any of the American land artists. David Nash makes not only sculptures 'quarried' from fallen trees, but sculptures which also grow themselves-both strategies reflecting on the perceived 'wisdom' of the growing tree.

Other notable artists use imagery of 'cleansing' to suggest the need to find remedies for the exploitation, waste and pollution of nature. Joseph Beuys' action of sweeping with a red broom in East Berlin in 1972 suggests that a dedicated street cleaner may be an artist of greater worth than a painter turning out work with no genuine creative impulse. In 'Touch Sanitation'-a year-long performance by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the artist shook hands with 8500 employees of the New York Sanitation Department, thanking them for keeping the City alive.

We also see artists making critiques of consumerism, parodying advertising techniques. Here I am thinking particularly of American artist Jenny Holzer's 'Survival Series' and Barbara Kruger's 'Endangered Species'.

Some artists address vacant lots or landfill sites. Alan Sonfist created his iconic 'Time Landscape' in lower Manhattan by introducing plants native to the area in pre-colonial times. Agnes Denes plants and harvests a wheatfield in Battery Park landfill in the shadow of the Twin Towers

before going and to create 'Tree Mountain' in Finland.

That leads us neatly on to:

Others involved in growing and gardening schemes which were the subject of an exhibition and publication 'Green Acres' curated by Sue Spaid in 2012. With Amy Lipton, Sue curated 'Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies' in 2002, and her exhibition 'Ecovention Europe' will be showing at Museum Het Domein in Sittard next year. I will leave Sue to elaborate on this.

So far, we haven't talked a great deal about what we might call the 'elephant in the room'- climate change, so let's end this section by exploring in more detail how artists have engaged with one important issue; irreversible changes to the water cycle.

Climate change is already melting the margins of the polar ice caps, raising sea levels and threatening to drown islands, coastlines and cities. Unreliable rainfall causes crop failure and flooding. Excessive urban extraction diverts water from land irrigation, creating deserts, and some of the mightiest rivers no longer reach the sea. Over a billion people still lack access to safe drinking water. Massive dams generate power for industry whilst displacing local communities, and chemical discharges, oil spills and plastic waste continue to poison our rivers and seas. We have all created a great problem.

The most successful art is that which moves us in ways that science and conventional education often fail. I'm not afraid to say it-but to LOVE our world more deeply. It helps us to contemplate the beauty of nature and our special responsibilities within it. It's what art has always done well.

In relation to water we might take a look at Susan Derges large scale photograms made under the surface of a river in Devon and Marlene Creates photographic portraits of herself taken from under a pond in Newfoundland.

Other projects, such as Tania Kovats' presentation of samples from all the world's seas and Amy Sharrocks' 'Museum of Water' make us aware of the presence of water everywhere in the world, including that within our own bodies (around 60% of our bodies comprises of water).

Rising sea levels are addressed in The Harrisons 'Greenhouse Britain' project (which we saw before), and in Eve Mosher's 'HighWaterLine' project. Flooding in Gideon Mendall's 'Drowning World' photographs.

Excessive water extraction in Basia Irland's projects along the Rio Grande (a once mighty river that no longer reaches the sea) and in Benoit Aquin's 'dust bowl' photographs shot in China.

Safe drinking water in Ichi Ikeda's 'Water Box' project and damming in Ruri's photographs of Icelandic waterfalls under threat.

Pollution, probably the most shocking to many, as seen in Daniel Beltra's photographs of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, and Chris Jordon's tragic photographs of the effect of plastic waste on seabirds.

Artists working within a group, or artists working alongside scientists is a growing tendency today. As Suzi Gablik writes 'exalted individualism is hardly a creative response to the needs of the planet at this time' .

In Britain in the Eighties, Common Ground led the way with campaigns that engaged local communities with their own distinctive surroundings.

Platform London have campaigned against oil pollution in the Niger Delta. Cape Farewell leads expeditions to the Arctic bringing education, science and the arts together.

In Korea (which is where I've just been), the artist group Yatoo 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!). CCANW has just signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work with the Korean Environment Institute.

But, how well are we actually doing in Europe? (We are still in Europe, aren't we?)

Interestingly enough, the Tate, recently chastised for accepting sponsorship from BP, organised a first important symposium in 1994 'The Future of Nature' which looked at what cultural forms will emerge when new knowledge undermines our traditional concept of nature.

Many exhibitions have addressed the subject since then, from 'Etre Nature' at the Cartier Foundation in 1998, 'Natural Reality', curated by Heike Strelow in Aachen in 1999, to 'Radical Nature' at the Barbican (2009). In 2005, the Royal Society of Arts, supported by substantial funding from the Arts Council, created its Art and Ecology Centre 'as a catalyst for the insights, imagination and inspiration of artists in response to the unprecedented environmental challenges of our time.' It closed 5 years later. Job done?

Few public galleries have a particular interest in art and ecology, notable exceptions being one in Sittard in the Netherlands- already mentioned-

and the Pori Art Museum in Finland. An exhibition 'Water.War', accompanied by an excellent exhibition, was recently organised by Gluon in Brussels.

Before I end, I'd like to return to the matter of 'human nature'.

At the heart of today's ecological crisis lies a serious failure, not only to understand the essence of humanity's place and responsibilities within the rest of nature, but to be conscious of the forces that drive human nature and determine the choices we make. Afterall, you can find in nature any lesson you want.

In past CCANW programmes, such as 'The Animal Gaze' we explored how artists have used animal imagery to make statements about human identity. 'Games People Play', our contribution to the Cultural Olympiad in 2012, went on to show how artists use photography and video of sporting subjects to make some wider comment on the human condition.

But why should this matter? Well, just as Decartes' distinction of man from the beasts provided an analogue for the subjugation of other races and the poor, since the English philosopher Thomas 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'.

Science questions the wisdom of establishing models of social behaviour on an incomplete understanding of nature. Today, we know that organisms are cooperative as they are competitive, as altruistic as they are selfish and as creative as they are destructive, and we now 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. The biologist Edward O Wilson puts it this way- 'We have created a Star

Wars civilization, with Stone Age emotions'.

What then are the most pressing issues? Let's choose just three which say much the same thing:

Firstly, we must acknowledge that the environmental crisis is a reflection of our cultural environment: a world in which fraud, bribery, cheating, corruption and intolerance are endemic and which pose as greater threat as climate change and also inhibit us in tackling it effectively.

Secondly, we need to release artists and our culture back from the high temples, from the art-zoos, from the temptations of investment commodification back into the wild world, back into everyday life where they are most urgently needed and belong.

And thirdly, we need to remember that the word 'culture' was originally used in the general sense of environmental improvement-in its agricultural sense, and it was only from the 16th century that it increasingly came to be used figuratively; as the soil was improved by good husbandry, so the mind was improved by education and the arts. Perhaps it is now time for the arts and education to help put care and culture back into everyday life?

The challenge, in essence, seems to me to come down to our need to reconcile the physical requirements of civilization with the new feelings for nature that our culture has generated, and to close the gap between modern, individual self-fulfilment and the general responsibility we have for future generations.

These are challenges to which we must all rise; artists, academics and curators along with the rest of humanity.

ENDS