SUSTAINABLE ART

FACING THE NEED FOR REGENERATION, RESPONSIBILITY AND RELATIONS

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The future of environmental art or reimagining a sustainable art practice? Real-world problems

Since the late sixties, scores of artists have presented artworks that offer society and scientists innovative strategies for overcoming challenging, environmental circumstances. It is well documented that artists such as AMD & ART, Tim Collins/Reiko Goto, Susanne Cockrell/Ted Purves (Ill. 1), Betsy Damon, Agnes Denes, Georg Dietzler, Harrison Studio, Patricia Johanson (Ill. 2), Lynne Hull, Laurie Lundquist, Matthew Moore (Ill. 3), N55, Viet Ngo, Ocean Earth, Buster Simpson, Michael Singer, Alan Sonfist, Susan Leibovitz Steinman, Superflex and Merle Laderman Ukeles have either participated in teams or initiated the design/construction of public works offering alternative-energy programs, eco-friendly housing developments, flood-wall retention schemes, food-production systems, habitat enhancement opportunities, power plants, repurposed landfills, solid-waste facilities and water-reclamation processes.[1]

Despite documentation/websites, this coterie of artists, whose practices necessitate the implementation of novel ideas, is so small, and their activities so intermittent, that they continue to operate well below the artworld radar. In forty years, only a handful of exhibitions have been organized to reflect upon their efforts. Too few are represented in museums and private collections. None has had the kind of retrospective that garners widespread attention. And art magazines like *Artforum, Art in America, Frieze,* or *Flash Art* routinely ignore such purposeful projects. Only monumental Earthworks garner publicity, perhaps because they're "too big to ignore."

It seems that the very art movement that arose to generate sustainable solutions risks becoming extinct, even as a greater environmental awareness starts to reshape the globe. I blame this oversight on the artworld's reluctance to accept what environmental artists do as art. I suspect that environmental art enthusiasts may be more concerned about this movement's fragility than actual environmen-

[1] Artistic solutions to environmental problems are detailed in my books: Spaid (2002); Spaid (2012 a); Spaid (2012b). Related books include: B. Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies,* 1992; B. Oake, *Sculpting with the Environment: A Natural Dialogue,* 1995; J. Kastner, *Land and Environmental Art,* 1998; J. K. Grande, *Intertwining: Landscape, Technology, Issues, Artists*, 1998; B. Nemitz, *Trans|Plant: Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art,* 2000; J. K. Grande, *Balance: Art and Nature,* 2004; S. Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties,* 2004; C. Kelley, *Art and Survival,* 2006, *Art in Action: Nature, Creativity and Our Collective Future,* 2007; J. K. Grande, *Dialogues in Diversity: Marginal to Mainstream,* 2007; Xin Wu, *Patricia Johanson's 'House and Garden' Commission: Reconstruction of Modernity*, 2007; Xin Wu, *Patricia Johanson and the Re-Invention of Public Environmental Art: 1958–2010,* 2013.

Ill. 1. Susan Cockrell/ Ted Purves, *Madisonville Foraging Woodland Garden*, 2012, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA, Photo Credit: Peter Huttinger

Ill. 2. Patricia Johanson, *Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility,* 2000–2009, Petaluma, California, USA

Ill. 3. Matthew Moore, *Urban Transplanter,* 2010, Pasadena, California, USA

tal artists, who are no doubt busier than ever![2] The question remains, "Does it really matter whether the artworld accepts their efforts *as art?*"[3] My claim here is that it matters a lot whether practical ecoventions (ecology + invention) are recognized as art, precisely because this genre's future practitioners will be self-selected from tomorrow's pool of emerging artists. Unless the artworld actively promotes ecoventions as a viable artistic pathway, on par with sculpture, video art or digital art, this movement will fail to retain its institutional memories, let alone engender prodigy to invent and implement ever better options and manageable alternatives. Unable to inspire progeny, let alone sustain the artworld's interest, environmental art risks extinction, not unlike endangered species.

Despite this fragile state of affairs, I wholeheartedly envision a future where communities invite *qualified* artists to be present at the drawing board from the onset, rather than later. Too often, communities wait too long to harness artists' energies and unwittingly exploit artists' creativity to alleviate destruction caused by natural/man-made disasters, whose degree of harm these very same artists could have prevented had they been consulted at the onset.[4] I imagine a future where interested artists function more as "first responders" than as mere "alarm bells."[5] As such, they participate in discussions regarding real-world problems and their contributions are respected independently of each project's physical scale. That is, small contributions are no less vital than giant ones, a point that projects by Brandon Ballengée, Mel Chin, Tara Galanti and Aviva Rahmani repeatedly demonstrate. I sometimes worry that an artist like Ai Weiwei is more famous for his architectural incursions with Herzog and de Meuron on the "Bird's Nest" Aquatic Center (2008) and Serpentine Pavilion (2012) than for his smaller, more provocative efforts, such as his using the Internet to supersede government restrictions on personal freedom, while under house arrest.

More and more, society can expect artists to intervene on community policies and scientific methods, however modest, as well as welcome experiments whose imaginative outcomes overwhelm their practical potential. We must find ways to encourage eco-minded artists to engage problems that expand stakeholders' appreciation for local conditions even when artistic approaches fail to resolve particular problems. When each environmental artist identifies a different problem, engaged stakeholders gain access to the complexity of natural systems.

Artworld problems

Although approaches invented by artists to deal with the environment are bountiful and often stretch the human imagination in terms of inventiveness and originality, additional environmental problems arise each day, reducing art's unlimited potential to a zero-sum game. To date, artists focused on resolving ecological issues have had to struggle with museums even to be accepted as contributing to art history, let alone ecological progress. Muse-

[2] I employ the term "environmental artists" generically to include those whose artworks address place in a manner that invites spectators to reflect upon their immediate environment. I usually distinguish "eco-art" ("I know") as art that references environmental issues from "environmental art" ("I can") which is temporarily situated in the landscape from "Earthworks" ("I will") which permanently take up a lot space but rarely address their site. Because "ecoventions" require combining the "I know," the "I can," and the "I will," they effectively blend all three approaches.

[3] Danish artist/activist Bonnie Fortune (see: Fortune 2014), challenges my worry that *only* alternative institutions exhibit environmental art projects. She asks, "Are you being pragmatic about artworld hierarchies, or do you see the ultimate marker of the success of a piece as recognition in larger art institutions?" Email correspondence with Bonnie Fortune dated August 8, 2013. My concerns are more art historical than pragmatic. Art historical status typically begins with exposure in alternative venues, but it eventually requires recurring mainstream publicity (museums, art fairs and biennials) to lure art historians to research this field. I offer the example of *Fluxus*, the global performance-art movement (1963–1978) that exhibited and organized festivals, yet failed to garner art historical import until two decades after its ringleader's death. Fandom generated by *In The Spirit of Fluxus* (1993–1995), a Walker Art Center exhibition that traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art, and on to museums in Chicago, Columbus, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Barcelona, Marseille and Antwerp, compelled MoMA to purchase the Silverman Collection of Fluxus Art in 2008. Art needs its publics. Without routine acknowledgement and awareness of environmental artists' efforts, I sense this imaginative movement's extinction!

[4] Although the qualified artist may lack specific university degrees or job experiences, the research and experiments that he/she conducts either in the studio or in the landscape enables him/her to formulate hypotheses that require testing/implementation in order to gain credibility.

[5] The new genre of "catastrophe art," featured in MoMA PS1's *Expo 1* (2012), MoMA PS1's *September 11* (2011) and New Museum's *Against Nature* (2008), posit artists more as alarmists who elicit emotions of fear, disgust and anxiety, rather than first responders who actively find ways to prevent disasters and/or alleviate situations that engender these emotions.

ums have typically refused to exhibit living material (like plants, soil, microbes or water) for fear noxious molecules might drift through air ducts to contaminate invaluable paintings. Similarly, collectors, whether private individuals or museums, have been less than receptive to environmental projects, leaving only a handful of artworlders to appreciate what environmental artists do, whether implementing projects or creating plans/documents. Most surprising, many artworlders still reject outright environmental artists' practical solutions as art.[6] The capacity for artists to take on public projects depends on their receiving sufficient funding, opportunities to test their ground-breaking ideas and recognition for their efforts, otherwise the public cannot trust them to do what they do best. There must be some way to reach collectors, museums and the artworld press, who might find environmental art's far-reaching outcomes actually of interest to their constituencies. Thus far, the ordinary public seems far more receptive to this vanguard than the artworld itself.

Not surprisingly, neither museums nor collectors are entirely to blame for the apparent lack of interest in environmental art. Environmental art is rarely taught as part of art history, which makes it doubly difficult for museums to organize exhibitions that might interest spectators and collectors alike. When environmental art is mentioned, however, it is typically discussed under the rubric of land art or Earthworks, rather than artworks like ecoventions that offer practical solutions for avoiding well-known disasters. Eco-curator Roel Arkesteijn admits that he knows "very few curators/museum people who know about this field, or show an articulated interest in this field."[7] So long as art historians exclude environmental art from their cannons, we cannot pretend to be surprised that museums also ignore it.

When environmental artists are asked to make something special to exhibit amidst the white cube, curators must assume the additional role of "mediating/translating between the intentions of the artist and the expectations of the audience, which likely expects to see commodities."[8] Forty years ago, when most environmental artworks were rather prototypes for some "dreamed up" real-world scheme, artists viewed exhibiting in the white cube as compatible with rallying support for real-life projects. Artists like Robert Smithson created "nonsites" that referenced "sites," in hopes of luring spectators from the gallery to the actual outdoor site. Over the past fifteen years, however, artists have increasingly found ways to insert their work into real-life projects, making the need to exhibit "nonsites" indoors seem superfluous, if not contradictory to their primary goal of resolving problems outdoors.

Furthermore, it's often nearly impossible to get the sense of actual artworks from white-cube-friendly objects like photographs, drawings or videos, let alone objects meant to demonstrate proposed concepts, though such artworks can be appreciated on their own merits. Arkesteijn recalls the way encounters with Andy Goldsworthy's photographs didn't prepare him for the majesty of experiencing his sculptures *for real* at Île de Vassivière, Storm King Art Center or the Refuges d'Art Digne-les-Bains.[9] "Nonsites" must be clever enough to lure spectators to discover the actual "sites."

Despite all the valid reasons environmental artists proffer for eschewing public exhibitions, the "white cube" experience typically enables artists to attract diverse audiences, inspire the cadre of future environmental artists and garner public support for upcoming projects, so exhibitions cannot be dismissed or even deemed tertiary activities, as if doing-something-in-the-world necessarily takes precedence over exhibiting models or ephemera related to such "doings." Even architects and designers benefit from exhibitions that facilitate a greater awareness, especially since media attention rarely accompanies built projects, unless there's an ensuing controversy. One could argue that in situ projects go hand-in-hand with exhibitions, since they're mutually supportive. Problem is, environmental artists engaged in real-world problems are increasingly so involved in day-to-day projects that they rarely feel the urge to create exhibitable works, let alone collectable objects, the way artists concentrated in their studios might.

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[6] For more on this topic, I recommend two of my recent essays: Spaid (2014).

[7] Email correspondence with Roel Arkesteijn dated July 30, 2013.

[8] Email correspondence with Roel Arkesteijn dated July 30, 2013.

[9] Email correspondence with Roel Arkesteijn dated July 30, 2013. See: Goldsworthy (1999) for details of Goldsworthy's dedicated sculpture park in France. Goldsworthy's sculptures exemplify environmental art, though they are not functional.

Sometimes, having to produce artworks for the purpose of an exhibition is just well, a real "pain in the neck" that takes environmental artists away from the work they enjoy most. Unlike designers or big-time art stars, I know of no environmental artist who oversees a large-scale studio and can simply assign the task of producing exhibitable works to studio assistants. Being focused on exhibitions requires that it be a huge priority.[10] Even assembling/packing all of the drawings and models for some project that's already underway can be a multi-day task that takes artists away from real-world projects with real-world deadlines and project pitfalls, etc.

Moreover, many of these artists originally turned to environmental art in order to rebuff the artworld's well-known acquisitive agenda and dog-eat-dog rat race. As Arkesteijn remarks, a lot of environmental artists "don't care [about] or are even hostile against producing commodities, which could function in a gallery circuit or the art market... I can imagine eco-artists are more focused on processes and solving environmental problems than on creating exhibitable works."[11]

Forecasting the future

Forecasting the future requires first identifying structural problems restraining environmental art's growth and then proposing implementable strategies for countermanding said obstructions. The main problem identified thus far concerns the way the activities of eco-minded artists still fall well below the artworld's radar, as well as environmental artists' apparent mistrust of the artworld's presentational formats. One solution that seems obvious is an "Environmental Art Fair" of sorts, a four-day international event that changes venues each year. After ten years, this coterie's numerous ideas could be broadcast to diverse audiences stretching from Vancouver, Shanghai, Perth, Mumbai, Dortmund, Sheffield, Quito, Rio de Janeiro, Mexicali to New Orleans. Corporations could use these fairs to broadcast their green initiatives, offsetting costs to artists, galleries, museums and municipalities presenting their eco-minded projects. While artists and environmentalists have historically been weary of corporations whose financial support of environmental events amounts to "green-washing," whereby consumers are misled to associate environmentally-unfriendly companies/products with environmental benefits, corporations, such as Coca-Cola and Nike, are increasingly finding "economically-selfish" reasons to take climate change seriously.[12] Like an ordinary art fair, panel discussions could be organized around the topics of collecting eco-art/exhibiting environmental art, working with communities/developing stakeholders, evaluating ecoventions' societal impact, exploring the newest ideas being implemented and tested, or assessing the significance of collaborations/stakeholders, etc. Costs to artists for participating could be offset by their being paid to present their practices during this forum, a kind of TEDx for environmental art.

Since 2013, I have been meeting with potentially interested art schools to launch ICAN (International Consortium Art Nature), an Environmental Art MFA to be integrated with six existing MFA programs. Its four core courses would be offered online (for free) in English, French and Spanish with hopes of simultaneously educating interested citizens on six continents. Additionally, participating MFA programs would offer in situ practicums to their students, who are chosen via each school's routine selection process. After six years, ICAN will disband, having graduated enough environmental artists to teach, work, write, curate, etc.

Arkesteijn proposes an international periodical devoted to progressive living with artist-initiated environmental projects at its core, to complement the Dutch magazine *Cashew,* whose focus is city farming. Realizing that environmental art would appeal to ecologists, scientists and people interested in alternative leaving, he recommends a "new progressive magazine which would be able to cover/bridge different fields: art, environmental issues, conscious living, socio-political and ecological activism, permaculture, the transition movement, etc."[13] None of this seems beyond reach, but it certainly requires many more people getting involved at all levels and on all fronts.

Although the very sustainability of environmental art suddenly seems at risk, thwarting its demise is far easier than solving environmental degradation.

[10] Mel Chin is the rare eco-artist who seems to exhibit regularly in museums, perhaps because he has had more difficulty getting his proposed "real-world projects" off the ground.

[11] Email correspondence with Roel Arkesteijn dated July 30, 2013.

[12] Davenport (2014).

[13] Email correspondence with Roel Arkesteijn dated July 30, 2013.

Environmental art's survivability simply requires luring more people into its orbit, whether as environmental art writers, curators, artists and teachers. The future depends on us, which is why recurrent conferences such as University of Wrocław's annual Sustainable Art conference, United Nations Conference of the Parties in Paris (COP 21) and the Global Nomadic Project (2015–2018) carry such high stakes. Organized by YATOO Korean Nature Artists' Organization, the Global Nomadic Project will tour Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Europe and the Americas. One amazing outcome of YATOO's 2013 International Nature Art Curators' Conference was the publication of *The World Nature Art Catalogue,* which details the many activities of 38 different independent groups on every continent such as the annual Land Art Festival in Lubartów, Poland, an event jointly organized by the Lubartów Cultural Centre, the Zamoyski Museum in Kozłówka and the Alwernia Association. YATOO's foresight to take their nature-art biennial on the road in the form of the Global Nomadic Project, whose locations will continuously shift like Manifesta, provides a wonderful opportunity to inspire widespread interest in nature art and environmental degradation across the globe. Our future, as well as that of environmental art, is literally tied to the sustainability of these kinds of perennial events.[14]

[14] This paper is a modified version of the paper that I presented on 4 October to close the 2013 International Nature Art Curators' Conference, held at Kongju National University in Gongju City, South Korea. Organized by YATOO Korean Nature Art Association, the four-day conference convened 19 curators, working on 5 continents, to share their projects.

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