

Ecoventions qua an Arendtian Account of Freedom, Action and Miracles

Sue Spaid, co-curator with Amy Lipton of 'Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies' for the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, discusses 'ecoventions' – more than just an artform.

In Hannah Arendt's seminal essay, *What is Freedom?*, she remarks that "only where the I-will and the I-can coincide does freedom come to pass". For Arendt, the 'I can' liberates willing and knowing from their bondage to "necessity," specifically the insufficiency of talents, gifts and other qualities that impede action. That is, freedom exists whenever one overcomes their natural limitations to implement a plan. The term 'ecovention' (ecology + invention) was coined to describe an artist-initiated (the 'I will') project that employs an inventive strategy (the 'I know') to transform (the 'I can') a local ecology.

Here, 'transform' doesn't necessarily mean improve or fix, since such experimental acts yield unpredictable outcomes. Unlike science, ecoventions defy instrumentalism. An ecovention's value reflects the way human potential has altered history's course, rather than the action's measurable success, though most ecoventions exceed expectations. Taking action is the alternative to doing nothing.

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Unlike other kinds of land art, ecoventions generally balance all three positions. For example, earthworks stress the 'I will', environmental art emphasizes the 'I can' and most eco-art focuses on the 'I know'. The collaborative nature of ecoventions, which often involve artists, scientists, citizens, volunteers, politicians, architects, urban planners and landscape architects in wide-ranging discussions from start to finish, ultimately balances these positions, making their realization possible.

Other forms of land art are rarely so collaborative, even when artists employ others to build their projects. As team

members generate ideas, funds, labor and legitimization, each participant freely inserts him-or-herself into a shared public space by word and deed. Reflecting the significance of discussion, eco-artists Newton and Helen Harrison, who often hold public forums, refer to their working process as a 'conversational drift'. The local citizens' role as stakeholders is of paramount importance, since an ecovention's survivability depends upon those stewards who will protect and maintain it once it's built. As such, ecoventions exemplify Arendt's positive

"To be free and to act are the same."

Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, 2000

construction of power, whose energy derives from collective action, because "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world".

Despite a fifty-year history of artists working with the land, the art world has been rather slow to accept and acknowledge the more recent tendency of ecoventions as a legitimate genre. There have been myriad museum exhibitions concerning land art, earthworks, environmental art and eco-art, but the collaborative attribute of ecoventions has been overlooked. There is a tendency to view ecoventions as too practical, too political, too ideological or too collaborative to be a valid aesthetic practice. Although ecoventions' public nature makes them 'political', they don't match the 'political' or 'activist' mold. Paradoxically, the group of forty or so artists who have produced ecoventions over the years have widely different approaches and interests, so this is hardly an ideological or practical bunch. Given a particular site, each artist would generally identify a different problem, so they could never agree on the same solution. Some refuse outright to name a

problem, while others focus on biodiversity, and others still, restore the land or water using untested solutions. Unlike science, freedom is the cornerstone of ecoventions.

Now let's turn our attention to action, since Arendt remarked that "the *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action". In 1958, Yves Klein exhibited an empty space at Paris' Iris Clert Gallery to demonstrate the priority of social encounters over objects; Hannah Arendt published *The Human Condition*, delineating human action as the linchpin of our political capacity; and the Situationist International (SI) began disseminating *Internationale Situationniste*, the journal whose aesthetics of everyday life inspired actions, or interventions involving the creation of revolutionary 'situations'. For Arendt, each unpredictable action releases human potential to initiate unknowable processes:

"To act...means to take an initiative, ...to set something into motion...Since we always act in a web of relationships, the consequences of each deed are boundless, every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction, every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes... In acting, in contradiction to working, it is indeed true that we can really never know what we are doing."

Arendt was expanding upon Karl Marx's notion of man as *homo faber*, which elevated labor and work above contemplation and reason. Her efforts to differentiate labor (activities geared toward survival) from work (creative, yet utilitarian acts) from action (a new course of events dependent upon the presence of others) paved the way for political possibilities unimaginable to Marx. By emphasizing the open-ended nature of *acting* in action (*praxis*) in contrast to the rule-oriented *making* in work (*poiesis*), Arendt disputed Aristotle's concept of *praxis* (Greek for action), which had historically been considered practical or instrumental. Similarly, the SI called for 'livers' to carry out playful actions that would be equally open-ended and collective:

"Our action... can be briefly defined as the invention of games of an essentially new type... We must try to construct situations, that is to say, collective ambiances, ensembles of



impressions determining the quality of a moment... It is easy to see to what extent the very principle of the spectacle – nonintervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world... The role played by...those who cannot be called actors but rather, in a new sense of the term, 'livers' must steadily increase." (Guy Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action')

Both Arendt's political philosophy and the SI's theories call for action, recalling the 1960s public announcement "Don't get under a rock, get into action!" Lacking prescribed motives, actions inaugurate events that derail history. Such actions' outcomes are not only unpredictable and irreversible, but their impact cannot be undone the way an object could be destroyed. Nonetheless, undocumented actions, like unpublished ideas, risk being forgotten.

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During the late 1950s, only objects were admissible as fine art, yet performance art began sprouting up around the world. Perhaps the prevalence of choice-oriented existentialist literature and philosophy inspired artists to consider actions, like Yves Klein's empty exhibition, as works in their own right. Existentialists believed that every action implies choices, while complacency fosters self-deception. They highlighted the paradox and contradictions implicit in life's choices. Acknowledging the unpredictable character of the universe, post-war novelists created subjects who found themselves face to face with pure contingency. Rather than accept conventional lifestyles, people who explore options, however absurd, express personal freedom.

Arendt's political essays have been characterized as existentialist, although she was not strictly associated with this fashionable movement. While the crises of contradiction and paradox accompany typical existential accounts of free choice, Arendt's brand of existentialism is particularly optimistic (never erring). By emphasizing empowerment (the 'I-can'),

discussion and public appearance, Arendt offers immunity against existential regret and angst. Her essays rarely address art, yet she particularly admired works of art (whether literature, painting or music) for their uselessness, durability and worldliness. Remarkably, she distinguished such works from their source of inspiration and described enduring works as 'thought things'. Similarly, the SI theoretically split the art object from the event that produced it, enabling them to emphasize its underlying attitude(s). Actions, unlike objects, are ephemeral, though their consequences often last. Arendt valued durability, but SI instigator Guy Debord considered eternity the grossest idea a person could conceive of in connection with actions. Durable things do last, but their significance is fluid.

How do ecoventions relate to Arendt and the SI? Despite Arendt and the SI's widespread influence, the well-documented history of performance art and the significant relationship between actions and object-making (see Paul Schimmel's *Out of Actions*), the art world has been slow to recognize ecoventions as actions, public works with an unstable, performative component. Today's open-ended ecoventions exemplify the kind of existential actions characterized by Arendt and the SI. Not surprisingly, the early eco-artists adopted the language of 'actions', rather than 'events', 'happenings' or 'situations', performance practices already in vogue. It is unknown whether such artists were influenced by the SI's call for 'actions', Arendt's notion of action or Harold Rosenberg's coining 'action' painting to denote painting as a moral act.

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In 1962, Joseph Beuys proposed an 'action' to clean up Germany's Elbe River. In 1971, he performed both 'Forest Action' and 'Eine Aktion im Moor' (Bog Action), to publicize the rapid deforestation of Germany's forests and destruction of European wetlands, respectively. Hans Haacke's 1965 manifesto called for changing, indeterminate, living-in-time, unstable, light-responsive works of art that viewers could

handle, which inspired his 'Grass Grows' (1969). Patricia Johanson installed 'Stephen Long', a light-responsive 1600-foot long ribbon of color alongside a railroad track in 1968. That same year, Agnes Denes explored the life cycle's process of regeneration with 'Haiku Poetry Burial', 'Rice Planting' and 'Tree Chaining'. A year later, Alan Sonfist monitored the air quality of four popular New York City intersections and posted the results at the site for all to see. In 1970, Newton Harrison performed 'Making Earth' in his studio. The seeds were sown for new ways to create and experience art.

Originally the purview of individual artists, such actions became increasingly collaborative by the early 1980s. Some early joint efforts include: scuba divers, biologists, engineers and oceanographers helping Betty Beaumont launch 'Ocean Landmark' (1978-1980) off the coast of Fire Island; 'Ocean Earth', the transnational habitat think tank, incorporating in 1980; Texas naturalists advising Patricia Johanson on 'Fair Park Lagoon' (1981-1986); volunteers clearing, planting and harvesting Agnes Denes's 'Wheatfield – A Confrontation' (1982) at the foot of the World Trade Center; Free International University students planting 7000 oaks in Kassel for Joseph Beuys's 'Save the Forest' (1982-1987); and Mierle Laderman Ukeles assisting architects and engineers on the renovation of the New York City Department of Sanitation Marine Transfer Station (see *Ecoventions: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* for details of these actions).

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Arendt ascribes the accolade of miracles to those processes that re-orient some natural series of events in unexpected ways. She certainly would have regarded ecoventions as miracles, since humans interrupt "some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected". She notes that historical processes of stagnation have occupied the "largest space in recorded history", lasting and creeping on for centuries, while the "periods of being free

have always been relatively short in the history of mankind". Even Arendt's cosmology is predicated upon an infinite series of improbable miracles:

"For from the viewpoint of the processes in the universe and in nature, and their statistically overwhelming probabilities, the coming into being, of the earth out of cosmic processes, the formation of organic life out of inorganic processes, the evolution of man, finally, out of the processes of organic life are all 'infinite probabilities', they are 'miracles' in everyday language."

This possibility for historical miracles, whereby freely acting humans redirect history's course to establish a reality of their own, is embedded in Arendt's optimistic view of human capability: "to be human and to be free are one and the same. God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom". Art history is full of improbable miracles. As such, every existing thought-thing continues to inject fresh concepts into human discourse, thus altering history's past and future.

Since ecoventions stand to transform local ecologies, they stand as the most tangible manifestation of art's disruptive role. As experiments carried out in the context of the art world, ecoventions are able to withstand a higher level of risk than similar scientific experiments. Such experiments usually cost less as works of art and garner broad support as community-building public projects, a feature that gives ecoventions a distinct advantage over pure science. Furthermore, their success isn't judged by the artists' ultimate ability to publish the results or repay sponsors, as would be the case for scientists. Ecoventions are viewed as a positive contribution that makes a long-term restoration project immediately attractive to a wider audience. By uniting the 'I will' and the 'I can', they provide public models for freedom at a time when liberty is most in jeopardy.

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Artscares

Susan Leibovitz Steinman salvages materials directly from community waste streams to construct public art that connects common daily experiences to broader social issues.

In the late 1980's, after 18 years as a professional ceramic artist / sculptor, I began creating 'Artscares' – environmental sculptures and installations that connect political and personal community life, global and local ecological issues. Site-specific and audience-specific, Artscares celebrate the values of community-based self-determination, collective action, and art as functional part of everyday life.

In transitioning materials and genres, I try to carry forward what I most admire of the ceramic arts community: its earth-based, no-material-waste work ethic. It's labor-intensive, socially functional, technically demanding, and aesthetically rewarding art. Despite real need and creative egos, there's a shared global language among ceramic artists that transcends politics and borders, and is worth studying.

Over the last dozen plus years, the Artscape projects have increased in scale and complexity. Most are temporary and involve community participation or audience interaction. Designed for multiple functions and meanings, the aspiration is to create aesthetically dynamic, conceptually relevant artworks that function as educational greenscape models of bio-intensive gardening, bioremediation, reclamation and recycling. A more mercurial double-sided goal is to critique precarious ecological and social situations and still, to constructively seed hope through action.

**COLLABORATION is key.
INCLUSION is achieved via
collaboration.**

Collaborations – with public school students, community action groups,

community college horticulture students, public infrastructure staff, and other artists – are essential to this methodology. The primary collaborators may be teachers or grass-roots community leaders. For example, rather than my 'teaching' students, I collaborate with the classroom teacher whose on-going relationship with his/her students fosters a deeper exploration of issues and a richer art experience.



'Power Towers East', 1996, temporary installation in series, specific to each site. Salvaged shopping carts, native live trees, outdated computer parts, stones or debris. This one is at Empire Fulton Ferry State Park on the East River, in Brooklyn, New York. Rubble was collected from nearby demolished housing sites. Loaned and/or salvaged carts from nearby streets. Later, the indigenous trees were permanently planted in the park.

Picture provided by Susan Leibovitz Steinman

Collaboration is based on a political belief that people and organizations living in affected communities have a right to participate in a process to create the context and content of public art.

Structurally, collaboration allows me to work on several projects at a time, which is helpful working with communities, cities, permit processes and the like where timeframes are not under the artist's control. It also allows me to work with a vast range of personalities and agendas, visiting different worlds through different people. It's a form of itinerant art that has as many possibilities as people working on any given project.

Collaboration has a built-in critique mechanism that allows for exploring further

