The Oasis in the Ruins

A Sustaining and Sustainable Art

Jennifer Coralie[1]

In 1987, The World Commission on Environment and Development, appointed by the United Nations, presented a definition of sustainability in its findings which became known as the Brundtland Report. It stated that:

> Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.[2]

This widely publicised definition is not, of course, the only way to explain what sustainability means: the verb "to sustain" means to preserve, maintain and uphold what is already there, but it also means to follow up and follow through. Sustainability is a process, and to assess it every part of the process must be considered with regard for the consequences, both direct and indirect. Ecosystems are complex adaptive systems that change, and the behaviour of a system cannot be predicted just by looking at the individual parts; change does not tend to be linear but non-linear. The ability of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic functions and structures is known as ecological resilience.[3] Thinking about the world in terms of resilience does not mean that we should accept global warming or loss of biodiversity, nor does it mean more control in order just to keep things in a state of equilibrium: rather we should embrace and work with ecological variability and be more intelligent about the causes of change that lead to less desirable conditions for humans as well as other-than-human life on this planet.

Creative as well as scientific intelligence can imagine what a more resilient world would look like, and artists can teach us about adaptability and innovation—two skills that, along with resilience, contemporary art practitioners need in order to simply keep going. Artists are able to make visible the inextricable link between us and a living and often fragile environment, whether it is urban or "wild." Artists working in the area of environmental art balance interpretation of place with physical transformation of place. However, artists are also implicated in the very practices they critique, especially when they are part of the contemporary market

---

1 Jennifer Coralie is currently undertaking research towards a PhD in the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University. She has a Masters Degree in Creative Writing, and a BA and Grad. Dip., Fine Arts.

2 http://brundtlandnet.esbenson.dk/brubdtlandreport.htm

3 B. Walker & D. Salt (2006), *Resilience Thinking: sustaining ecosystems and people in a changing world*, Island Press, Washington DC.

economy. The main ecological imperatives of energy minimization and resource preservation mean that the mixing of materials, often obtained from non-local sources and disposed of unsafely, or synthetic and even toxic, should be an issue that artists confront in their practice. Various artists have taken an overt political stance, challenging the cultures in which they live; they have refused to participate in capitalist relations of production, refused to exhibit in galleries, explored alternative materials, and questioned what it means to be an artist. But not until the middle of the twentieth century could art be called "sustainable" in western culture, and even now the term does not describe a mainstream art movement, but a distinct sub-group of artists.

It is possible to view the culture of the West as an "interminable, aimless voyage," to use Paul Ricoeur's phrase, through a kind of super-museum consisting of the bric-a-brac of many civilizations.[4] For some artists, this aimlessness enables a kind of freedom or even a stance of deliberate refusal (the refusal of "mastery," for example, by women and non-Western artists), while for others the impoverishment of meaning may lead to the search for a new universalism.

One way of restoring meaning is by claiming connection to the earth, or Gaia, it/herself: the search for connection leads to connection. Non-Western forms of art, cultural practice, spirituality and attitudes to the natural world offer alternative ways of addressing the dangers posed to the viability of our species on a threatened planet, dangers created by obsessive individualism, consumerism, industrialisation and unsustainable development.

How are artists today addressing these issues and how does their work reflect it? Is a sustainable art possible? I will frame this discussion by focussing initially on certain aspects of the Land Art movement which I wish to reconsider in light of Freya Mathews' philosophy of reinhabitation, outlined in her book *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture*.[5]

Returning to "nature" in an urbanized world means allowing the process of resilience to proceed, or, in Mathews' terms, allowing the world to go its own way. This acceptance of the materially given is both radically transformative and subversive, in that it affords an ethics of conservation and resistance to the political, social and economic structures that are responsible for our alienation from each other and from the more-than-human world.

Land Art

There is no art movement and no manifesto under the heading of Sustainable Art, although environmental issues have been addressed in works of art since at least the early 1960s, when artists began trying to break free from the constraints of formalism,

---

4 D. Crimp (1985), "On the Museum's Ruins," in H. Foster (ed), *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Classics, Pluto Press, London p. 50

5 F. Mathews (2005), SUNY Press, Albany and UNSW Press, Sydney.

or the Eurocentric concern with form and method. Many of these works might be retrospectively called sustainable, but were from around 1968 labelled Land Art, Earth Art or Environmental Art, and might now be called Eco-art or Green Art.

Land Art took art into the landscape; it was concerned with an immediate and physical interaction with landscape, the environment and nature. The site of the work became a component of the work rather than just a setting: in other words, sculpture became a component of a cultural space rather than a nomadic object set on its own pedestal. Land Art was a diverse series of actions and processes carried out by artists in the landscape, but it cannot be assumed that direct interaction with the landscape always indicated a true ecological or sustainable perspective. Environmental and ecological ethics were being developed and articulated in the early 1960s and 1970s, but although many artists would have been aware of the exciting possibilities arising out of philosophy, critical theory, post-colonial and feminist theory, there was no "eco-language" with which to discuss human interactions with nature. Indeed, in 1968, Leo Steinberg, who was one of the first to apply the term postmodernism to the visual arts, stated that "the most radical shift in the subject matter of art [was] the shift from nature to culture."[6] The desire to place work in the landscape often had more to do with the desire to connect the processes of art-making with other systems of knowledge, especially ethnographic or "primitive" ideas, or with an interest in natural materials and sites, along with expanding the boundaries of art as outlined above.

Land Art is often referred to as American Earthworks and usually involves actual physical manipulation of sites or site-construction, often creating massive disturbance to the earth's surface through use of bulldozers and other heavy machinery; such heroic interventions appear to have more in common with mining or engineering than with a sustainable art practice. The work often took place in remote areas of the American desert and required enormous amounts of money including sponsorship deals; the sites were also usually impossible to access and could only be seen from the air. One such example is Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, Nevada, 1969, which required the removal of 240,000 tons of rock and soil. The artist claimed to be developing a unique American art and drew parallels between his work and South American and Mesoamerican monumental structures. To him, it had nothing to do with landscape or the romanticism of the West, but with the search for materials. The intention was not to reclaim and heal the land, as it was for some land artists; in fact it could be seen as a form of appropriation of the land, echoing colonial strategies of the past. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Utah, 1970, is a piece which demonstrates more of an attempt at dialogue with its environment. Built from local mud and rocks, it is a 1500 foot long spiral located on a piece of leased land in the Great Salt Lake, Utah, usually photographed from the air because it is situated in such a vast and deserted place. Smithson's art practice, poetic writing and

---

6 L. Steinberg (1972), "Other Criteria" in *Other Criteria*, Oxford University Press, New York , pp. 55-91.

thinking were informed by his knowledge of subjects ranging from natural history and mathematics to language, philosophy and Science fiction. He was interested in the degraded landscape of the Great Salt Lake for aesthetic reasons, but also because, to him, the dialectic of nature included "physical contradictions inherent in natural forces *as they are*": nature in fact is not a condition of the ideal.[7] The mythic status of the piece is perpetuated through art criticism, poetic writing, photography and film, but it is constantly being acted upon by the light, wind, water and the minute forms of organic life that exist in the desert, and it will continue to erode and merge with the site over time. If sustainability implies an awareness of the effects of our actions on the future, then Smithson's interest in time, change and entropy demonstrates such awareness. He stated that he was a supporter of art that took into account the direct effect of the elements as they existed day to day, of nature in both its "sunny and Stormy" aspects, although he like other land artists never spoke directly in terms of "ecology."

There were other artists who distanced themselves from the dominant trends within the Land Art movement, believing that the Land artists were simply transposing the modernist sensibility into the environment. Some artists, especially Richard Long and Hamish Fulton in the United Kingdom, were directly concerned with understanding and articulating the impermanence of life on earth, choosing to document their own movements across the surface of the planet, and the placement of natural objects in impermanent arrangements in the landscape. Richard Long has inspired many artists working in the I980s, 1990s and today with his respect for place and stress on the importance of experiencing the "real" world. His practice was based on thoughtful views of art and nature, and making art that was both visible and invisible: he viewed his own art as "… the antithesis of so-called American Land Art, where the artist needed money to be an artist, to buy real estate, to claim possession of the land and wield machinery. True Capitalist art." [8]

Nature and Culture

Artists of course do not exist in isolation from their culture: Kate Soper, in her book *What is Nature: Culture, politics and the non-human*, shows how we are all "locked into systems of work, modes of consumption, and forms of transport which make our individual acts daily involuntary agents of pollution, waste and ozone deficiency." Art production, like all production, is part of a "linear and exponential productivity" rather than a cyclical and self-renewing productivity.[9]

Art is not "natural" in that it does not usually employ resources that it directly produces and sustains: the raw materials used to create art are usually not directly created by the artist. Aristotle, in *Nichomachean Ethics*, says that the arts "are

---

7 R. Smithson (1972), "Cultural Confinement," *Flash Art* No. 32, May-July, p17

8 R. Fuchs (1986), *Richard Long*, Thames & Hudson, London pp. 46-7.

9 K. Soper (1995), Blackwell, Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, p. 267.

not concerned with things that exist or come into existence from necessity or according to Nature."[10] Art is a product of the human mind, an artificial construct and a contemporary cultural product: landscape is an ideological concept that usually refers not to where we live, but where we go to replenish ourselves or experience the exotic. The very idea of the "human" arose from setting the "civilised" and "productive" members of society above the less-than-human and hence closer to the "wild" and "natural" state of nature, which included women, natives and animals. We believe that people who live in a closer relationship to nature must necessarily be more "natural." They do not create "art" because art is artificial, therefore what they create is called craft. This is not the place for a discussion about the contextualisation of the art and artifacts of "tribal" cultures, however Soper reminds us that human creative production always relies on nature and involves utilisation and transformation of natural resources whether or not it takes place in urban or remote, "natural" areas.

Freya Mathews points out that, from a panpsychist point of view, *all* matter is "endowed with an interior or subjectival as well as an externalized aspect"; in other words, material form is a manifestation of mentality. Mathews defines *artifice* as what happens as a result of the intervention of "abstractiveness," or abstract thought, while *nature* is whatever happens when agents under the direction of abstract thought let things be. "All things, whether animate or inanimate, have laws of their own unfolding."[11] Furthermore, as artist Robert Smithson so wisely stated: "Nature is never finished." [12] Mathews acknowledges the influences of non-Western philosophies on her thinking, particularly Chinese Taoism and Indigenous Australian traditions. Artists in the 1970s and 1980s were often inspired or directly influenced by non-Western systems of thought and art practice. It is not my intention in this article to survey the art of the last thirty years of the twentieth century, however the 1970s were important in that artists, including many feminist artists (for example, Jackie Winsor, whose work was influenced by the wrapping techniques of the traditional handicraft of basketry), looked at tribal, indigenous or non-western art on its own terms, and these discoveries began to inform their ideas about the environment and the use of sustainable materials.

The *Artists in Nature* International Network founded in I989 in Europe, aims to promote environmental awareness through the use of art, posing questions around nature and culture. The movement is predominantly Italian, German and

---

10 J. Harell, W. Tatarkiewicz, Eds. (1970), *History of Aesthetics, Vol. 1: Ancient Aesthetics*, Trans. Adam and Ann Czerniawski, Mouton, The Hague and Paris p. 156. Also quoted in K. Soper (1995), p. 267

11 F. Mathews (2005), p. 27. Briefly, Mathews' version of panpsychism deploys Platonic terminology, but to non-Platonic, non-dualist ends. Panpsychism is outlined most fully in Freya Mathews (2003), *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*, Albany SUNY Press, Albany.

12 R. Smithson (1972), p. 17

Scandinavian, and the artists associated with it create works of art in natural environments or on the outskirts of large cities, using materials exclusively from the local area. This use of natural materials and the shunning of the artificial can be seen as a rejection of contemporary society and has led to accusations of a fetishisation of the handmade and pastoral.[13] However beneath this concern for the natural and the emphasis on sustainable materials lies a deeper interest: stone circles, pilgrimage routes, sacred trees, goddess imagery and shamanistic trances and healing are influences in the work of many of these artists, who aim to restore lost connections to nature through the revival of ritual. Chris Drury has worked with natural objects such as feathers, seeds, pods, herbs, bones and eggs, as well as cultural objects like baskets, maps, cairns, chambers and shelters. Works such as *Four Days by a Lake: Canvas Lavo*, Lapland, 1988, a simple canvas shelter in which he lived for four days, and *Tree Mountain Shelter*, Italy, 1999, an igloo or mountain-shaped shelter made of stones and woven hazelwood, typify his preoccupation with the nature-culture dialectic. The shelter is a carapace separating the human being from nature; nature is being viewed from within the shelter of culture, but the materials of nature have been used in the shelter's construction. Drury also took part in *The Floating Land*, Noosa, 2003, the second *International Site-Specific Art Laboratory* held in Australia. Nineteen artists created work over a two-week period in 2001 in the first of these art experiments in nature, including Francois Davin, one of the founders of *Artists in Nature*. Drury is primarily interested in meditation and transformation, in the poetic and symbolic, and in correspondences between the human body and nature.

Other artists favour a more direct interaction or even collaboration between nature and culture. "Growing Art" creates a different dialogue with nature; it is art that becomes indistinguishable from nature, an art that works with living trees, plants or fields. David Nash planted a ring of 22 ash trees for the *Ash Dome* in North Wales in 1977 at a time when the Cold War was a threat and nuclear war a possibility. Planting the trees and encouraging them to grow into a living dome shape became a symbolic gesture of hope in the future and also demonstrated the need for nurturing and commitment. One of the pioneers of the Land Art movement, Agnes Denes, combined environmental activism with planted projects or "Growing Art." *Wheatfield, A Confrontation*, USA, 1982, was a wheat field planted on a garbage landfill site two blocks from Wall Street and facing the Statue of Liberty. The intention was to create "a powerful paradox…for the calling to account," referring directly to both the lost paradise of childhood summers, and to the fact that she had used land valued at $4-5 billion to grow wheat worth around $300.[14]

---

13 B. Tufnell (2006), *Land Art*, Tate Publishing, London p. 83.

14 H. E. Johnson (1992), *Agnes Denes*, Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, p. 118.

Green Art and Beyond

A younger generation of artists in the I990s and in the first decade of the twentieth century, began to address the relationship between human beings and nature in a climate dominated by species extinction, loss of habitat, and the threat of global warming. The threats to the environment pointed out by Agnes Denes and other artists of the 1980s were perceived by them to be posed by science and technology as well as the capitalist system itself. The responses to these threats varied, as we have seen, oscillating between the political and the personal, highlighting the increasingly complex world in which we live. The paradox of technology is that while it is the agent of often harmful and destructive changes, it also enables us to see the scale of environmental change and it offers us avenues of action. Artists working in environmental art over the last fifteen years or so have been generally not so concerned with an idealised past or a Utopian future, but with the present; with the possibility of cultures co-existing and interacting with each other, a re-engagement with the quality of the urban environment, and the taking of individual responsibility through acts of healing. The response to global threats of all kinds has been to search for ways in which to live more sustainably and more creatively with technology. Artists today are very aware of the political implications and ecological costs of what they do; artists using technology are often commenting on technology. They may use the very medium that is itself a part of the disposable culture they critique, addressing such issues as the built-in obsolescence of equipment, disposal of waste, harmful materials and by-products, and the exploitation of the people who make the products.

The new "green" artists are often interested in the overlap between art and technology, and they are most certainly aware of developments in critical art practice. Many young artists use the visual languages of design and new process-based modes of art making, as opposed to the hand-made, to create works that emphasise the link between environmental concerns and other social relationships. Collaborations between artists and scientists develop projects that offer concrete solutions to specific ecological problems, with an emphasis on sustainability. One powerful example is the AMD & ART group in the USA, who transform polluted land by draining discharge from mines through ponds lined with crushed limestone that neutralises the PH and leaches out metals and other pollutants: these sites become public artworks with the participation of scientists, historians, engineers, landscape architects and the local community. The use of new technologies including the internet, through which information about the environment is rapidly disseminated around the globe, means that global art projects now also take place on the web as well as in “real” or concrete spaces. Sites such as *platform london.org*, *arts and ecology.org*, and *Groundworks*, create and encourage innovative projects that are driven by the need for social and environmental resistance, change and justice. Artists have discovered that art can be local and international in the same instance; by immersing themselves in local projects and paying attention to the here and now,

to local landscapes and streetscapes with all their problems and complexities, they can tell political, historical, and ecological stories that illustrate how nature and culture collide in work that often juxtaposes the natural and the artificial.

In *Reinhabiting Reality*, Mathews insists that it is possible to recover a more truly human sense of "at-homeness," or being in the world; indeed, our cultural and physical survival is dependent upon sustaining and renewing our connection to Earth as our only home. Mathews includes urbanized and industrialized environments when she writes of "returning to nature," because the attitude of letting-be means allowing *all* things to grow old; all things unfold in their own way, including buildings, and "nature returns *everything* to the life cycle, it recycles everything."[15] Urban artists in Australia are currently re-establishing their right to live in and enjoy their own cities. Through rehabilitating derelict urban spaces (warehouses, laneways) and turning them into spontaneous and temporary galleries where local artists can exhibit work, construct installations, or simply meet each other, they are "reinhabiting" and cherishing places that were previously neglected. Sometimes these reinhabiters move into abandoned and off-limit buildings to create site-specific and ephemeral work in what could be called "criminal" acts, because the walls they use are private property even though they are about to be bulldozed. Questions could be raised as to whether these actions are criminal or works of urban healing.

How can our appreciation of the disorderly perfection of what we call "nature" be balanced by a sense of urgency and the need for action on climate change and other global threats? I would argue that the value of art lies in the poetic, critical and transformative practices of the artists themselves: artists act as witnesses, instigators, provocateurs and problem solvers. Artists demonstrate the practice of "reinhabiting reality"; rediscovering nature in an urbanized world they rehabilitate the damaged earth in the light of a new ethic of sustainability that embraces renewal rather than the new. By paying attention to the world, artists encourage us to allow it to go its own way rather than continually "making the world over in accordance with abstract designs." [16] Artists can inspire people to see the world in new ways and they can actively promote connections between people and encourage thinking "outside the box." Some projects take place over decades, demonstrating a belief in the future, in the random and accidental, and a different understanding of time that has more in common with indigenous ideas about time than linear or sidereal time. Artists also work in a personal and poetic way in gestures of personal defiance and belief in the value of art making.

Sometimes a poetic act can become a political one, as demonstrated by Yutaka Kobayashi's project *The Oasis in the Ruins*, Turkey, 2000, an installation in abandoned dwellings using overflowing spring water. The government had seized control over the flow of water from a local spring and diverted it for use in the city

15 F. Mathews (2005), p. 36.

16 F. Mathews (2005), UNSW Press, Sydney p. 31

water system. The artist used the remaining slow flow by leading it to an ancient stone basin, encouraging the overflow back into the underground water system and irrigating new plantings of flowers and fruit trees. Embracing the possibility of living in the here and now in a "eutopia" or good place, rather than yearning for a "utopia" which is no place, will always involve risk and paradox, but it is the business of art to show us the way.