

ARTISTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A REPORT FROM THE 81ST COLLEGE ART ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE IN SEATTLE

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Artists have a long history of social activism. Now in the closing decade of the twentieth century, they are part of a movement to take art out of the galleries and into the public arena as a tool for education and social change. Among the most pressing concerns to many artists is our deteriorating environment. Yet few environmentalists outside the art world are aware of artists' contributions, both in raising environmental concerns and working on solutions. More and more artists are dealing with environmental topics in their artworks. This trend was much in evidence at the 81st Annual Conference of the College Art Association, held in Seattle, Washington, on February 3-6, 1993. Two sessions were devoted to environmental topics, and both were heavily attended, despite the small rooms allotted to them.

The first session, entitled "Art and the Environment, New Parameters," showed some of the ways artists are dealing with environmental topics. Chairs Susan Fillin-Yeh and Sandra Sammataro Philips pointed out that, as with feminist art theory, an underlying theme of these artists is that the personal is the political. Showing their reaction to life on a polluted planet, many artists exhibit a particular concern with systems and the place of humans within those systems. Some also explore personal feelings about our relation with the earth. Ms. Yeh explained that she became personally involved when she moved to the West Coast and realized the extent of deforestation in the region. Ms. Philips became involved with a group of photographers who were documenting the ways that water laws in Western states support agribusiness while degrading the environment and driving out family farms.

Patricia Fairchild presented a brief history of earthworks, focusing particularly on Michael Heizer, one of the best known exponents. Earthworks are site-specific artworks in which the land itself is the medium, manipulated by the artist. It bears kinship to both sculpture and conceptual art and has been influential in the field of landscape architecture. The type of art has been particularly associated of late with environmental reclamation projects, but earthworks detrimental to the environment have also been created.

Artists began making earthworks in the 1960s as a reaction to the political and social climate both within and outside the art world. Artists felt alienated from the art market and museums, which were seen as unresponsive to artists' social concerns. One way to protest this situation was to remove art from areas controlled by the art establishment and locate them in public spaces, or even in remote wilderness areas. An early example of this phenomenon was Heizer's Double Negative of 1969/70 which was a double trench cut into the top of a high desert mesa in Nevada, displacing 240,000 tons of earth. No environmental impact statement was required at that time. Contemporary reactions from artists and critics show a lack of awareness of possible negative impacts on the environment. Instead, the creative needs of the artist were emphasized. The artists were interested in nature's effect on the artwork (how it weathered and eroded), but not on the artwork's effect on nature. Walter De Maria also worked on desert sites, making lines and other patterns best visible from the air. He was inspired by Native American petroglyphs but created his works with bulldozers, with little concern for fragile desert soils. On the other hand, Robert Smithson seemed less interested in making his mark on nature. He was among the first to propose that earthworks

could serve a reclamation function. In his influential *Spiral Jetty* of 1970, he used a sand-mining site on the Great Salt Lake in Utah to create a work which was intended to be erased by nature in a fairly short time.

In the 1970s, earthworks were seen to have more practical and beneficial potential than simply awing the viewer by moving large quantities of earth. Ethical questions were asked about earlier earthworks like *Double Negative*. A pristine mesa had been purchased for the sole purpose of making it into an artwork, or rather, defacing it, as many now thought. Such works were beginning to be seen as egotistical attempts to gain mastery over nature. They are also aesthetically incompatible with their natural surroundings; *Double Negative* is often compared to an abandoned construction site. In addition, it has weakened the side of the mesa, causing further erosion. But Heizer still clings to his art-for-art's sake attitude. He distances himself from the reclamation artists, though he has in fact worked on reclaimed sites. In *Effigy Tumuli*, he worked in cooperation with the federal government on a strip-mine site. However, he says that he was hired merely to provide earth sculptures, and the fact that the site was cleaned up is irrelevant to him.

Next, Susan Edwards and Jackie Brookner, editor of the special issue "Art and Ecology" of *Art Journal* (Vol. 51, no. 2, Summer 1992), described their traveling exhibition "Planted on Earth: the Fabric of our Lives." Its theme is cotton farm workers, and it seeks to show that the exploitation of the environment and exploitation of people go hand in hand. The main cotton growing areas of the United States, traditionally the Deep South, have been spreading west as a combination of depleted soil and the boll weevil lead to falling yields, while expanding markets caused increased demand. Ms. Brookner's installation features soil from several U.S. cotton growing regions which is molded into the shape of the feet of cotton workers. These are placed on a dirt floor, separated only by rubber soles, to represent the worker's estrangement from the soil, though they are made of the same substance. Accompanying the installation are photographs selected by Ms. Edwards from those produced by the Roosevelt Administration in the 1930s documenting poverty in the American South. Even though a declining economy and depleted soils lead to wide scale poverty and farm failures in the 1920s and early 30s, the Roosevelt Administration needed to build public support for rural relief programs to overcome objections by conservatives that such programs were communistic. Though these powerful photographs were intended to present a sympathetic image of the poor, they have also had the effect of stereotyping rural Southerners. Also, the Farm Services Administration, which emerged from the New Deal relief programs, subsidized the use of fertilizers and pesticides to help both farmers and the American chemical industry. This has had the effect of causing ever more environmental damage to these regions. Today, 25 percent of all pesticide used in the United States is used on cotton.

Melinda Hunt discussed her work documenting the potter's fields of New York. Potter's fields are undeveloped areas used as mass grave sites for the poor, immigrants, orphans, prisoners, and the mentally ill. These were usually located on the edges of the city, but as the city expanded it enveloped and built over them. One such mass burial site lies beneath the New York Public Library. New York's current potter's field is Hart Island, the least developed large area of the city. It retains much of its rural beauty, but is one of the densest graveyards in the country. Over three- fourths million people are buried there, 50 percent of whom were children under five years of age.

Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison are artists with a long history of environmental concern. They work on ecosystems, documenting degradation and proposing solutions, and work with scientists, governments, and funding agencies to have them implemented. They presented the outline of a new proposal entitled "Work at the Edge, Where the Cost of Belief has Become Outrageous." They showed slides

of the Pacific temperate rain forests, stretching from California to Alaska, and the destruction caused by clear cutting. The forest is disappearing at an alarming rate, being replaced by managed, monocrop tree farms, which lack the diversity of a forest. Open space used to be an anomaly in the forest, but now old growth is the anomaly. The death of a great forest is a global tragedy, and who can seriously value its total destruction? The Harrisons envision a serpentine lattice -- the serpentine patterns of the coast and the crests of the coastal mountain ranges, with the forest nestled in between, and the lattice of rivers running from the mountains to the ocean. They propose restoring the watershed areas between these rivers to protect both the forests and the rivers. Human activity should be confined to the areas in between the rivers, making human dominated areas islands in the midst of the forest instead of vice-versa. Who will pay for this? Ask rather who will pay the cost of continued deforestation. The Gross National Ecosystem is shrinking. The loss of resources will eventually effect the Gross National Product. If we took one percent of the GNP as an Eco-Security System, the money could be used to buy land, create job opportunities far beyond those lost by reduced logging, and begin to restore the forests to their former extent and diversity.

Discussant Linda Troeller noted how the concept of beauty can be used as a provocation and as part of a dialog that artists can use to explore our connectedness with the environment. She asked the artists about the role collaboration plays in their work. All of the artists on the panel are collaborating with other artists or working with people normally outside the art world, such as scientists, anthropologists, bureaucrats, politicians, or the public. There is a movement among many artists to break down the Renaissance ideal of the heroic lone artists, exemplified here by Michael Heizer. The Harrisons, who have been working with the Croatian government and the World Bank to purify the Sava River, work a great deal with scientists. They are not afraid to ask them for help, but find that the best way to quickly acquire a working knowledge of a specialized subject is by reading. They suggest beginning with simple books, sometimes even high school texts, and moving on to more sophisticated works. Ms. Hunt has been working with New York City officials and finds that some were more helpful than she expected because her project was different than what they usually encounter in their jobs and they felt like they could actually help get something done. However, she found them more helpful if she did not describe her work as art.

An audience member suggested that traditional art venues may be superfluous for this sort of art, and perhaps the artists should consider exhibiting at places like natural history museums or community centers. Libraries were not mentioned in the discussion, but might also be appropriate sites. All the artists on the panel agreed that it was necessary to take their work outside the museums. The Harrisons added that educating children is especially important, and schools love to have people volunteer to speak to classes.

The afternoon session was called "Decorating the Augean Stables? Uses of Ecological Reclamation for Public Art." The chair, Susan Boettger, said the title was inspired by one of the Labors of Hercules in which he cleaned the vast Augean Stables by diverting two rivers to flush them out. This session focused on earthworks used for the purpose of reclaiming sites damaged by human activity. She warned of an ethical dilemma facing artists -- the danger that they may be used to justify environmental destruction, since it is good public relations to hire an artist to make the site look presentable again. And what are we trying to reclaim? Many artists want both to restore the environment and the primal experience of nature and are trying to integrate it back into life.

Gail Gerbert spoke of what she called the Gaia pioneers. The ancient Greeks called the earth Gaia. Now Gaia is used to refer to the interconnectedness of all things on Earth. Art is the conscience of society, and as

many in society are trying to find ways to restore a more balanced relationship with nature, artists are trying to nurture the Earth through reclamation of sites damaged by human activity. Science, technology and art can work together, and artists are trying to lead the way. After all, Leonardo da Vinci saw no incompatibility between these disciplines. The modern artist tries to bring these together in the service of the earth.

Gyorgy Kepes believed that art and science could meet on common ground. Science has helped artists see in new ways, especially with aerial and microscopic photography. Buckminster Fuller believed that there could be radical social implications to technology and that it could be used to rid the world of poverty. Harvey Fite was one of the first artists to use land reclamation as an aesthetic expression. From 1939 to 1968 he worked a quarry to obtain stone for sculpture, and he eventually saw that the quarry had become a sculpture itself. He began to work directly on the quarry, transforming it into a public sculpture park. Bauhaus-trained Herbert Bayer began working on what he called environmental designs in 1958 in Aspen, Colorado. These public open spaces took inspiration from Japanese gardens. The late Joseph Beuys, a major figure in conceptual art, was also a cofounder and candidate of the German Green Party. He led a series of public political demonstrations for ecological causes, including a "forest action" to save a threatened forest tract in Dusseldorf in 1971, and a tree planting action in Kassel in 1982. Seen as romantic by contemporaries, his ideas have gained in significance over time. Also mentioned were Roger Smithson, the Harrisons, and Patricia Johanson. Ms. Gelbert concludes that a new image of the earth, expressed in the Gaia Hypothesis, now drives these artists. One of their chief inspirations was made possible through science and technology -- the photo image of our planet taken from space -- small, isolated, and irreplaceable.

Greg Skinner spoke about the vicissitudes of the Earthworks 79 project in Washington State. In 1978, the King County Arts Commission suggested a symposium on sculpture having to do with the land. This eventually evolved into a project on land reclamation as sculpture. Robert Morris and Herbert Bayer were among the artists who participated, and each was assigned a site to work on. Many of the sites were abandoned quarries. There was a great diversity of designs, but not all were funded or completed. Robert Morris received a quarry site next to the highway in Kent, Washington. It was chosen by the county not because it really needed much reclaiming (the vegetation had started growing back), but because a site accessible to the public was desired. There were fewer environmental concerns then. Nowadays, such a site would probably not be chosen, especially in view of the artist's design. It is a series of concentric circles, mimicking the shape of the hole left by the quarry. He cut down the trees on the site and painted the stumps. Mr. Skinner described the construction of the piece, which was fraught with problems. The artists were also hampered by other county agencies that really didn't want to cooperate with the project. Despite its obligations, the County does not maintain the site, and it is often filled with garbage.

Artist Patricia Johanson expressed her concern with preserving genetic diversity. She objects to the notion of preserving just a few species, as though they were objects in a museum. Artists can bring vital issues to public attention. Reclamation art can serve as a model of how human activity can be integrated into the natural environment. She began working in this area in the late 1960s, doing conceptual designs in the shapes of plants and flowers, which could be used as flood and erosion control projects. In the 1970s she began to turn these ideal landscapes into actual practice. She likes the idea of reclaiming places to be used both as wildlife areas and public spaces. She uses aesthetics as a problem-solving tool and turns parks into ecology gardens. She has successfully transformed an algae-choked lagoon into a public park filled with birds, plants, fish, and other aquatic life. She is currently working on a sewer site in San Francisco Bay. Her

design is in the shape of the endangered San Francisco garter snake. The head is an earth mound, the body includes a walkway, and sculpture is planned to provide for the needs of birds and butterflies. She uses sculpture which creates living space for wildlife and is changed by nature, eventually being reclaimed itself. She feels that the greatest contribution of ecological art may be its own demise.

Joan Marter titled her presentation "Artist's interventions in a thousand points of blight." The problem of degraded mining sites and toxic waste dumps increased during the Reagan/Bush era. Though the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977, passed during the Carter administration, required that damaged lands be restored, enforcement has been negligible under the recent administrations. Ecological reclamation works by artists should be examined for the short and long-term effects. Some artists design temporary works, such as planting vegetation intended to leech heavy metals out of the soil. Other artists work at reconstruction and reclamation, which makes a permanent change in the site. For example, Nancy Holt is currently working on a landfill site in New Jersey. It will be a naked-eye solar and star observatory, with points to mark the solstices. It includes a methane recovery system for power and plants for erosion control. She is inspired by prehistoric ceremonial sites. Harriet Feigenbaum has worked on strip-mine sites, planting trees for erosion control. Michael Heizer has also worked on a strip-mine site. Like many other earthwork artists, he is influenced by the mounds left by Native Americans. Though ecological concerns are marginalized by the mainstream power structure, artists are helping to bring the issue of environmental reclamation to public attention.

Art critic Jeff Kelly discussed the Earthworks 79 works of Herbert Bayer and Robert Morris. Bayer's project, a flood-prone area turned into a public park, is beloved by the people, whereas Morris' site is abandoned by the public and the government. Morris' site is the picture of devastation -- the devastation of the original use of the site, made visible again by the artwork. But Morris' site was reclaimed from industry, while Bayer's site was reclaimed from nature. It had been an undeveloped area which was considered dangerous in its natural state. (However, Bayer didn't note whether flooding had always been natural there, or if it had been exacerbated by development surrounding the site). Bayer was of the Bauhaus generation and had the social optimism of the old avant-garde. He believed that art could help create a good society. Morris' approach is akin to minimalism. On whose behalf does he reclaim the land? He didn't cover the hole and it isn't usable public space. Instead it presents a disturbing picture of a pit with the Kent Valley and Cascade mountains in the background. It is the terrain of Heaven and Hell coexisting, a symbol of devastation. He appears uninterested in using art to smooth over industrial devastation. Instead he uses art to restate that devastation. When we reclaim the land by art, we reclaim it also for art. It is an artifice. Morris reclaims the symbolic power of art to express human postindustrial waste.

Though these were the only sessions formally devoted to environmental topics, these concerns surfaced at other sessions as well. A program on landscape artists included a paper entitled "Ecology, Melancholy, and Landscape Video." At the very crowded session called Aesthetics and Ethics: the Artists' role in a Collapsing Society," artist Betsy Damon discussed environmental degradation and her work in restoring a creek, while Native American artist Gail Tremblay discussed her fears for the planet and the artist's ethical dilemma of creating material objects from resources ripped from the earth.

Artists have often acted as the conscience of society. Now, with the environmental crisis at hand, they are using their skills to force their audiences, and themselves, to face these difficult issues. While some artists focus on documenting or commenting on the destruction of the planet, others are using their creativity to

find solutions. Environmentalists in all fields could learn from the strategies of our colleagues in the arts. After all, aesthetics are important to our lives, too. In the discouragement and despair that many concerned people experience, artists can help to lift our spirits and inspire us to find creative ways to take action to restore the Earth.