

STUFF AND NONSENSE

the artist's predicament in an
object saturated world

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THE DILEMMA

There are still some people who continue to deny the notions of climate change and global warming however no-one who gives the idea more than a passing thought could fail to notice that humans are having a dramatic physical effect on our planet. Industrialisation has resulted in an aggressive, unchecked consumption of raw materials and a headlong race to make more, bigger, better stuff. Environmental science is complex, and the technological advances which have made access to information more democratic can also result in an information overload. Most days I still think it is easier to bury my head in the sand and hope it all goes away rather than to face up to all the questions. As a conscientious member of society I now have to take into account a myriad of factors just to fulfil the basic human needs of feeding, clothing and housing myself. In common with most other individuals in the industrialised global North I do not control the means of production of these basic needs. I must choose food, clothing and shelter that has been designed, sourced and procured by others.¹

Food, clothing and shelter are basic human needs. Art is not, but it has been interwoven with the societal development of man since the most primitive records began. The volume of research that has been undertaken into the origins and output of human creativity means there is no need for me to question here whether creativity has a place in society. I am starting now from the premise that humans are creative and some individuals very much more so than others. As an individual who has spent the last 7 years studying and practising the making of art this essay will question how best I should utilise my creative skills.

I am interested in examining the very real crisis facing myself and other artists today. How can we, with conscience, continue to bring new objects into a world that is clearly over saturated with objects already? What is our role now?

As this exploration is about my future as an artist it is “necessarily a partial exercise”². I am a contemporary visual artist working three dimensionally; nominally a sculptor. The inspiration for my work is the made environment, the human imprint. I apply deliberately simple techniques to discarded objects and waste materials to create sculptures and installations. My interest lies in the intrinsic beauty of the commonplace and the lowly and through my work I seek to amplify the connection between people and the constructed spaces which

¹ It is implicit in this comment that one of the choices I have made is not to opt out completely or try to become self sufficient.

² Bradotti Rosi *Nomadic Subjects* Columbia University Press NY 1994

they inhabit. The sculptures that I make are frequently 'reversible' in that they could be broken down into their component parts and re-used or recycled.

My artistic sphere of reference is firmly rooted in the various contemporary sculpture 'movements' of the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in particular minimalism, conceptual art, land art and arte povera. In searching for an answer to my questions, I begin with an examination of four art events that have taken place during the last eight years; Michael Landy's *Break Down* in 2001, *As if by Magic* at ArtSchool Palestine in 2006, Richard Long's *Heaven and Earth* at Tate Britain in 2009 and *Radical Nature* at the Barbican also in 2009. These exhibitions and others will be investigated in the light of my research into environmental art, the branches of philosophical thinking; deep ecology and ecosophy, and a 'cradle to cradle' approach to making.

The daily dilemmas which I wrestle with are well illustrated by Jim Cocola whose instructive essay exploring the ecosophy³ of Arne Naess paints the following picture:

"On a trip to the market I notice that fresh blueberries are on sale, but I know they aren't in season in these parts, and I tend to support local produce. Preferring a missed opportunity to a breakfast dripping with fossil fuels, I pass on the offer. Cycling through economy, ecology, and ecosophy in turn, I decide that my type of household wisdom—at least in this moment—will privilege planetary economy above personal economy. Or, perhaps, in a moment of weakness, I purchase the blueberries anyway, prioritising my own good over the good of the world beyond me."⁴

A blueberry dilemma of my own is central to my art practice. I have to eat, wear clothes and have a roof over my head so must always make a choice from the options provided me. However I do not *have* to make art, my problems arise because I *want* to.

BREAK DOWN

During two weeks in the February of 2001 Michael Landy systematically destroyed all his possessions. Over the previous year Landy had meticulously catalogued the 7,227 items he owned, from stamps, underwear and paperclips to artwork and his car. Then, in an empty

³ For more information on ecosophy see Appendix

⁴ Cocola Jim 'Ecosophy from T to X' *n+1 magazine* April 2006 viewed at www.nplusonemag.com/ecosophy-t-x 19.11.09

shop on Oxford Street, the previous home of a cut-price clothing retailer's flagship branch, he embarked upon what seemed to be the ultimate anti-consumerist gesture. Landy's belongings were placed on a network of conveyor belts where they were stripped down to their component parts by a team of uniformed operatives and eventually shredded (Fig. 1). By the end of the two weeks Landy's possessions had been transformed into just less than 6 tonnes of waste matter and he left the shop with only the clothes he had put on that morning.



Fig 1 Michael Landy *Break Down* 2001

My thoughts about *Break Down* are conflicting - and are well summed up by Dave Beech who, when reviewing the work said: "There is something heroic about chopping up everything you own and letting it all go: you admire his courage even if you think the whole project is misguided".⁵ Since his first major installation, *Market* in 1990, Landy's projects have explored commercialism and materialism and *Break Down* could be seen as the inevitable culmination of this line of enquiry. It raises complex questions about the value of objects.

Value can be assigned in several ways and I believe the flaw with *Break Down* is that it does not make a distinction between monetary, emotional and material⁶ value. It could be argued that once Landy had embarked upon this project the only way to conclude it with integrity was to destroy absolutely everything. I question why however, having sorted the items by type and material, the resulting scrap was sent to landfill.⁷ The BBC reported that "Mr Landy said the exhibition was an examination of society's romance with consumerism. 'It's about

⁵ 'Michael Landy: C&A Marble Arch' Dave Beech *Creative Review* 21 no2 F 2001 p30-31

⁶ material in the sense of matter not as an object of materialism

⁷ Originally the scrap was to be sold to finance the project. Part way through *Break Down* Landy decided not to honour this agreement which meant that he finished the project with a substantial financial debt.

the amount of raw material that goes into making objects and about the life-span of things.”⁸ If this were the case, why did he not use this opportunity to recycle or reuse the component parts and thus extend their life-span?

I think that Landy was trying to make a work about the monetary value as opposed to the other values of the objects, and in choosing to destroy personal items along with easily replaceable consumer durables he left himself a bleak future. Landy did not follow this material cleansing by embarking on a new way of living his life - he went straight back to his previous habits. One of the first things he did when he walked away from *Break Down*, having destroyed his wallet along with everything else, was to allow his gallerist Karsten Shubert to buy him a set of new clothes.⁹ He inevitably will have had to replace clothes, furniture and domestic objects, no doubt he bought a new car, but these ‘necessary’ consumer possessions must have seemed all the more empty without the personal possessions previously accumulated throughout his life along side them.

Break Down is arguably a defining moment in the recent history of art while for the artist it was but one part of his journey. In a recent interview with the Guardian, Landy said that of all his works he was most proud of *Break Down* but that it had been a mistake to destroy the artworks made by himself and his Young British Artist contemporaries.¹⁰ Not surprisingly it was difficult for Landy to make work after *Break Down* and it was more than a year before he began his next project, *Nourishment*, a series of detailed, botanical-style drawings of urban weeds.

AS IF BY MAGIC

In September 2006 Kay Pallister and Charles Asprey curated an exhibition in Palestine containing art works by twenty five European and North American contemporary artists. The project was conceived by Asprey following his involvement with ArtSchool Palestine¹¹ and his observation that Palestinians had no contemporary art venue. The exhibition was held in the Bethlehem Peace Centre. Due to the problems of security and insurance associated with staging a show in a war zone, none of the artists were able to physically send work or visit

⁸ ‘Man destroys life for art’ news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1162348.stm 18.11.09

⁹ ‘The Man Who Destroyed Everything’ www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/feature_micheal_landy.shtml 14.1.08

¹⁰ Barnett Laura ‘Michael Landy, artist’ *G2 The Guardian* 24.11.09

¹¹ ArtSchool Palestine is a non-profit making organisation which aims to function as a facilitating structure and base for the development and promotion of contemporary Palestinian art. www.artschoolpalestine.com

the exhibition site. Instead each sent a set of instructions to enable the making of their contributions.

The resulting exhibition, *As if by Magic*, included a Damien Hurst spot painting directly on the wall. Nathan Coley's large light sculpture *There will be no Miracles here* was translated into a set of drilled holes in the outer wall of the Peace Centre. Martin Creed gave instructions for the purchase of every size of paint roller available locally to be used in the execution of a wall painting. Andreas Slominski instructed that "eggs be thrown at the gallery wall and left to dribble down".¹²

The initial impetus behind this exhibition may have been political, and for many observers questions of authenticity and authorship¹³ were fore-grounded, but for me it also serves to illustrate how an engaging exhibition can be built without the presence of physically material art objects. The exemplar in this exhibition was Coley's *There will be no miracles here* which was created by the removal of stone and was therefore a work created by an absence of material.

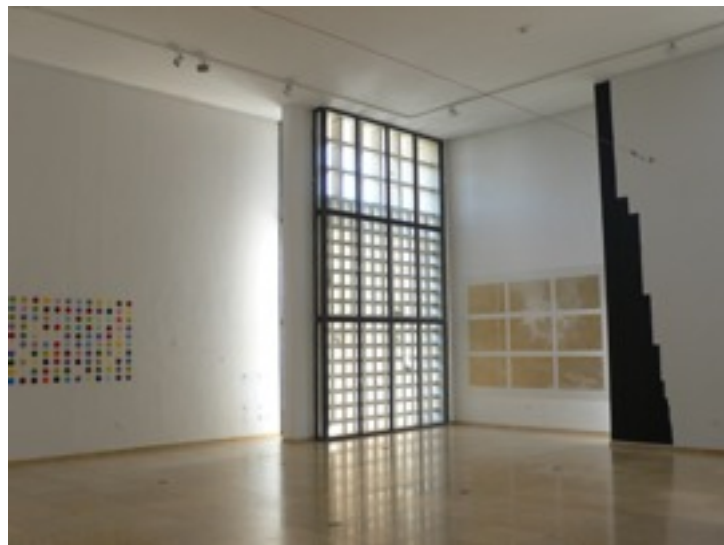


Fig 2 *As if by Magic* Installation view

The idea of making art works by instruction is not new of course, Sol le Witt wall drawings have been made this way since 1968.¹⁴ The extension of this process to an entire exhibition in this instance showed a level of ingenuity on the part of the curators and for the many

¹² 'Letter from Palestine' Sally O'Reilly *Art Monthly* November 2006 p35

¹³ 'Damien Hirst's £50 masterpiece' www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/damien-hirsts-16350-masterpiece-416821.html 23.11.09

¹⁴ Garrels Gary *Sol le Witt - A Retrospective* San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 2000 p37

artists involved who do not usually work this way, there must have been a great deal of commitment and trust. Despite the seemingly prohibitive restrictions of the location the curators successfully staged a show that would have looked perfectly at home in any number of modern art museums in Europe or North America (Fig. 2).

HEAVEN AND EARTH

Tate Britain staged a major survey of work by Richard Long in the summer of 2009. *Heaven and Earth* included work dating from his earliest interventions with the landscape in the mid 60s to his most recent works. Prior to this exhibition I had seen Long's work in many different venues including public and private galleries, the grounds of Salisbury Cathedral¹⁵ and the parkland of Roche Court.¹⁶ Seeing so many works in this Tate retrospective made real the expansiveness of his practice. Long's 40 year artistic career has been built upon a simple, primal activity - that of walking. His stimulus is wild nature and on the most basic level his works are all responses to it. The most tangible elements of Long's practice are the sculptures he makes; both impromptu arrangements in the landscape during his walks and planned installations of stone and mud in gallery settings. In addition he uses text, maps and photographic works to evoke the time and space of his walks.

Heaven and Earth shifted the emphasis towards the two dimensional results of Long's practice reserving only one of the ten rooms for his large stone sculptures. Long maintains that the real work is in the walk and only a picture or memory of the work is conveyed through these other two dimensional media¹⁷.

Often associated with Land Art by virtue of the work's situation in nature, Long's practice is manifestly different in outcome. Although he does share the Land Art artists' concern for the placement of sculpture, his methods differ greatly from those of the large scale earth moving works created by Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria and the other North American land artists.¹⁸ These artists also began their careers in the mid 60s and were exploring their relationships with the landscape, but Long's approach was more sensitive as he intimates when describing his work:

¹⁵ As part of the *Shape of the Century* exhibition in the Salisbury Festival 1999

¹⁶ The New Art Centre, Roche Court, East Winterslow, Salisbury, SP5 1BG www.sculpture.uk.com/

¹⁷ www.richardlong.org - home page 12.12.09

¹⁸ Kastner J and Wallis B *Land and Environmental Art* Phaidon London 1998 p63

“I consider my landscape sculptures inhabit the rich territory between two ideological positions, namely that of making 'monuments' or conversely, of 'leaving only footprints'. Over the years these sculptures have explored some of the variables of transience, permanence, visibility or recognition.”¹⁹

Long's exhibited stone sculptures, as opposed to his wilderness sculptures, are visually seductive but they have always troubled me conceptually. If Long is concerned with 'leaving only footprints' then surely the cut stone used to make works like *Stone Line* (Fig. 3) would be better left on the hillside? Perhaps these stone works are necessary crowd pleasers to enable Long to continue his main interest in making walks. Hamish Fulton, one of Long's St Martins contemporaries, also makes work by walking and Long describes Fulton as: “a bit more politically correct than me,” ...referring to Fulton's belief, best summed up in his creative motto, *Take No Photographs, Leave No Footprints*, that the landscape should not be altered for the sake of art.”²⁰ Although Fulton is also an exhibiting artist, he exhibits less often and in lower profile venues than Long which could deem him to be a less successful by current artworld standards.



Fig 3 Richard Long *Stone Line* 1980 - installation view at *Heaven and Earth*

Initially Long's work appears to be conceptually grounded in an ephemeral activity - that of the walk. In reality, the sheer volume of material artefacts on display in *Heaven and Earth* indicate that he too is seduced by the physicality of objects and the desire to make them. Long says that Fulton is more politically correct. What I think this means is that he is managing much better to fulfil the dictat - leave only footprints - and it could be argued that Fulton's work has the greater artistic integrity for this reason.

¹⁹ Long Richard *Walking the Line* Thames & Hudson London 2000 p68

²⁰ O'Hagan Sean 'One Step Beyond' *Observer* 10 May 2009 viewed at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/may/10/art-richard-long> 25.11.09

RADICAL NATURE

The *Radical Nature* exhibition at the Barbican also took place in the summer of 2009. The gallery guide which accompanied the show described it as “the first exhibition to bring together key figures across different generations who have created utopian works and inspiring solutions for our ever-changing planet.”²¹ The exhibition subtitle *Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* indicates its agenda of providing a potted history of what could be termed ‘environmental art’ to date. Works by twenty-five individual artists, partnerships and collectives span a wide range of working methodologies and material output.

The exhibition was spread over the two floors of the gallery with many of the smaller side areas off the main space used to present documentary material of the older works in the selection. These included a film made by Robert Smithson of his seminal work *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, a documentary film about Joseph Beuys alongside his sculptural work *Honeypump and the Workplace*, 1977, photographs and drawings of Agnes Dene’s *Wheatfield - A Confrontation*, 1982, and photographic documentation of Mierle Laderman Ukeles performance series *Maintenance Art*, 1973-74. Much of the ground floor was taken up by large scale contemporary works including Simon Starling’s *Island for Weeds*, 2003, Mark Dions’s *Mobile Wilderness Unit - Wolf*, 2006, Henrik Håkansson’s *Fallen Forest*, 2006 and Anya Gallacio’s *Meter*, 2009, a felled and reassembled birch tree. Many of the works employed living vegetation leaving me with a lasting impression of the main exhibition space as a tightly packed lush green experience.

Radical Nature also incorporated three commissioned works outside of the gallery including a re-staging of *Wheatfield - A Confrontation* and a companion project by the collective EXYZT of a functioning windmill to produce bread and flour.

I found *Radical Nature* informative. It wove together the concerns of the fledgling environmental movements of the late 60s with those of artists working with more complex information currently. But it didn’t feel radical. The most memorable work for me was Dene’s *Wheatfield* (Fig 4). The writer Hari Kunzru felt the same way and described its impact well:

“Agnes Denes standing in the wheat field she planted on waste ground in the shadow of the twin towers in 1982. The woman with the staff, waist-deep in yellow wheat, which stretches away until, shockingly, it ends in the glass and steel of New York’s

²¹ *Radical Nature* gallery guide published by the Barbican Centre

financial district, speaks about many things - global commerce, waste, a queasy nostalgia for an idealised agrarian past.”²²



Fig 4 Agnes Dene *Wheatfield - A Confrontation* 1982

Kunzru’s eloquent review of the exhibition put into words a sense of unease about the exhibition that I had not been able to pin down. He described it thus:

“If the seventies generation were about global ideas and blue-sky thinking, there’s now a certain modesty in the air. No one believes we’re about to enter a new age. It’s more about making the best of the old one. Projects are conceived in local terms, and (barring floating cities) are less about saving the world than recovering some flotsam and jetsam from the collapse. This is perhaps another source of the pervasive sense of sadness I felt going round the show – the feeling that forty years ago, there was a sense of possibility that has since vanished.”²³

Kunzru also found, as I did, that the exhibition catalogue²⁴ added a depth to the experience that could not be achieved by viewing the exhibits alone. In addition to detailing many other works by the selected artists the two catalogue essays flesh out the political contexts in which these artists have been working over the last 40 years.

²² www.harikunzru.com/radical-nature-art-and-architecture-changing-plane 15.01.10

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ *Radical Nature - Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* Barbican Art Gallery and Koenig Books London 2009

WHAT NEXT?

These four exhibitions were selected for scrutiny as I felt that each had a particular element that might shed light on an environmentally responsible way to make art work. I looked for two main criterion - art that professes to be environmentally influenced and art that tends towards objectlessness. Having studied them in some detail I feel that they all have contradictory, unsatisfactory factors.

Whilst Long's walks are the ultimate objectless works he does not stop with the walk - he is compelled to record it. In doing so he inevitably consumes resources - including, in particular, single-use cut vinyl lettering for his wall installed text works. Although *As if by Magic* contained no objects as such, there was an inevitable consumption of resources - paint, brushes, paper. Even *There will be no miracles here* uses energy to drill the holes, and what about the manufacturing processes involved in making the drill? Landy's endeavour resulted in 5 tonnes of material being consigned to landfill. *Radical Nature* made some attempts at lessening its impact by using recycled papers for its catalogue, posters and gallery guide, however it was full of energy consuming, material objects, whose associated transportation costs must have been huge.

So is it actually possible (or desirable) to make art work that has no environmental impact? Perhaps the best thing to do is to return to the most basic of artistic acts and make only pencil drawings on paper. On examination it transpires that even this seemingly simple act is fraught with difficulties.

Having visited the Cumberland Pencil Museum in Keswick I can establish a fair amount of information about the material origins of my Derwent pencil. It is made in Britain but the materials are sourced internationally. The Californian cedar comes from a managed forest but was necessarily shipped for 1000's of miles before arriving at the factory. The graphite is no longer locally mined but is imported from China. The pencil is painted. I cannot establish where the pigments for the paint come from or whether the paints are water soluble or made using petrochemicals. My pencil came in a cardboard and plastic blister pack. Was the cardboard made from sustainably managed trees? How far was the packaging transported to the factory? Is the plastic part recyclable? And then I need to consider the paper. Where was it made? Were the trees it was made from sustainably forested? Were chlorine bleaches used in its manufacture?

This may seem an over the top and extreme assessment of the simple materials required to make a pencil drawing on paper but this is typical of the disproportionate dilemmas that can arise from my sustained attempt to be an environmentally responsible artist.

WHAT IS ART ANYWAY?

Whilst trying to establish the best way for an artist to work the long debated questions of 'what is art?' and 'what it is for?' arise. The discussion of 'what is art?' has concerned philosophers for centuries and has become especially entwined with the critical discourse alongside recent art history. What is defined as art is not set in stone, it changes with time, location and culture. Indeed Nigel Warburton argues that it is indefinable.²⁵

“We can use the term ‘art’ effectively and understand each other when we talk about art, but that is not because all works of art have some defining essential ingredient that makes art what it is. We have culturally determined patterns and tacit agreements about relevant resemblances that can justify our expanding the concept of art to cover new cases.”²⁶

Thierry de Duve creates some distance from the question by considering it from the perspective of an extraterrestrial anthropologist. In attempting to categorise the term 'art' de Duve's diligent alien amasses a huge collection of objects named art but cannot make a logical connection between them all. He observes that;

“At the intersection of magical *action* and scientific *knowledge*, artistic *making* attributes a symbolic power to the things it names, at times gathering together, at times dispersing, human communities.”²⁷

Maybe it is not possible then to make a singular definition of art but one significant quality that art does have is the power to communicate.

For the purposes of this essay and within my practice I concur with Bruce Nauman's conclusion that “if I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing must be

²⁵ Warburton N *The Art Question* Routledge London 2003 p122

²⁶ op cit p122

²⁷ De Duve Thierry *Kant after Duchamp* MIT Cambridge Massachusetts 1996 p5

art....At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product.”²⁸ This idea of art can be traced back, of course, to the infamous act by Marcel Duchamp in 1917 of placing a signed, upturned urinal in an exhibition as an art object.²⁹ So taking it as read that art is what artists make a more relevant question within my debate is what is art for?

AND WHAT IS IT FOR?

Having said that art can be used to communicate it can be used for many other purposes as well, including to decorate, to challenge, and to explore. All of these applications for art have validity however it is the explorative and communicative functions that most interest me within the role of contemporary artists today. In their book *The Concept and Creativity of Science and Art* Denis Dutton and Michael Krausz find that:

“The creative act does not create something out of nothing like the God of the Old Testament; it combines, reshuffles, and relates already existing but hitherto separate ideas, facts, frames of perception, associative contexts. This act of cross-fertilisation - or self fertilisation within a single brain - seems to be the essence of creativity.”³⁰

I interpret this to mean that an artist’s job is to assimilate the maelstrom of information s/he is exposed to and elucidate an understanding through their work.

Contained within the *Radical Nature* catalogue, TJ Demos’ essay *The Politics of Sustainability: Art and Ecology*³¹ gives a detailed history of previous exhibitions that have been concerned with art and ecology. Demos also surveys the literature that has influenced many environmentally concerned artists from the late 60s to the present. He concludes that in combination with the high profile that climate change and related issues have in the current media, what has gone before has:

²⁸ Benezera N and Halbreich K *Bruce Nauman* Distributed Art Publishers NY 1994 p22

²⁹ Lynton Norbert *The Story of Modern Art* Phaidon London 1980 p131

³⁰ Dutton Denis and Krausz Michael *The Concept and Creativity of Science and Art* Martinus Nijhoff The Hague 1981 p2

³¹ Demos TJ ‘The Politics of Sustainability: Art and Ecology’ in *Radical Nature - Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* Barbican Art Gallery and Koenig Books London 2009 p17

“shifted the discourse on the environment. This has revealed new questions about what role art might play now that consciousness raising is being accomplished by the mass media and culture industry, even if still plagued by government inaction.”³²

I am wary of artworks that seek to preach about specific issues and feel that this particular job could best be left to writers and the media. This does not mean, however, that artists should turn away from these important issues. The closing words of Artur C Danto’s book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* help to clarify a subtly different role. Danto’s philosophical journey exploring what defines particular objects as art finds that:

“[Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box*] does what works of art have always done - externalising a way of viewing the world, expressing the interior of a cultural period, offering itself as a mirror to catch the conscience.”³³

I feel this neatly sums up my job description as an artist, to explore the mores of my time and offer the viewer to a chance to reflect.

NONSENSE

An interest in and sensitivity towards environmental issues has been part of me since my teens so I bring it to my artwork involuntarily. I had been conscious however of an underlying reluctance to examine these concerns in my work and have kept them very much in the background. They have not been my subject matter but have nevertheless shaped the rules that I set myself when making. Through researching this essay I have begun to elucidate my reluctance and clarity came when I found the website and blog of Peter Adams.³⁴

Adams’ blog posts are full of entries revelling in the joys of nature and he is clearly interested in and motivated by environmental issues. He makes a clear spiritual connection with the outdoors, located as he is in a stunningly beautiful, isolated part of coastal Tasmania. Regardless of whether I like the style of his work or not I was willing to forgive the evident self-satisfaction he takes in his island paradise until I discovered the account of his latest commission.

³² ibid

³³ Danto Arthur C *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Harvard University Press London 1981 p208

³⁴ www.windgrove.com/blog/ 16.01.10

His two ton wooden sculpture *King Neptunes Beads* (Fig 5), was created to be exhibited at the 2009 *Sculpture by the Sea* exhibition in Aarhus, Denmark approximately 10,400 miles journey from Tasmania. In fact this Danish exhibition was a partner exhibition to the original *Sculpture by the Sea* exhibitions staged in Cottesloe on the west coast and Bondi on the east coast of Australia. Twenty five other Australian artists also exhibited in Aarhus.



Fig 5 Peter Adams *King Neptunes Beads* 2009

Whilst *Sculpture by the Sea* makes no claims to be environmentally concerned, there can be no excuse for artists or curators to be so seemingly oblivious to the ‘art miles’ incurred by their work. This view is also held by James Marriot of Platform, the London based artists collective who have been championing social and ecological justice in their work for the past twenty years.³⁵

“[Marriot] is scathing of the continuing blindness of artists, curators and institutions to their own enormous carbon footprints. ‘They lug lumps of wood around the world for exhibitions. Printing a catalogue on recycled paper is pathetic tokenism – no FTSE company would get away with that.’”³⁶

³⁵ www.platformlondon.org 14.01.10

³⁶ Bunting Madeleine ‘The rise of climate-change art’ *Guardian* 2 December 2009 viewed at www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/dec/02/climate-change-art-earth-rethink 15.01.10

This statement also reinforces the ethical difficulties I expressed earlier with *Radical Nature*. Marriot was quoted in the Guardian in the context of two concurrent climate change influenced exhibitions. Madeleine Bunting's review of *Earth: Art of a Changing World* at the Royal Academy in London and *Rethink: Contemporary Art and Climate Change* at the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen highlights a widening field of exhibitions. Namely those which include works by artists who are influenced by environmental concerns, and pre-existing works which can be co-opted to add depth to the debate.

Two works from *Earth* and *Rethink* in particular highlight the complexity of the problem and bring me back to my blueberry dilemma. How do I find a path through the myriad of environmental and ethical factors that can impinge on an artwork?



Fig 6 Tomás Saraceno *Biospheres* 2009

Tomás Saraceno's massive architectural installation at *Rethink, Biospheres* (Fig 6), is made from vast swathes of plastic - a notoriously difficult material to reuse or recycle, yet this is from an artist who is focused on ecological questions surrounding interdependency.³⁷ Saraceno says: "Art is about trying to rethink the things you take for granted."³⁸ Perhaps he feels that the ends justify the means.

³⁷ 'Thomas Saraceno: lighter than air' calendar.walkerart.org/canopy.wac?id=4488 14.01.10

³⁸ Bunting op cit

Cornelia Parker's *Heart of Darkness*, 2004, was included in *Earth*, an exhibition that is intended to "encourage debate, discussion and creative thinking and the role art can play on the relevance that climate change has on our daily lives".³⁹ *Heart of Darkness* (Fig 7) was created from the carbon-black fragments of wood that remained after a forest fire and could be judged to be made from environmentally sensitive materials. However this work was not made with an environmental message in mind but in response to the vote counting scandal in the 2000 US presidential election.⁴⁰

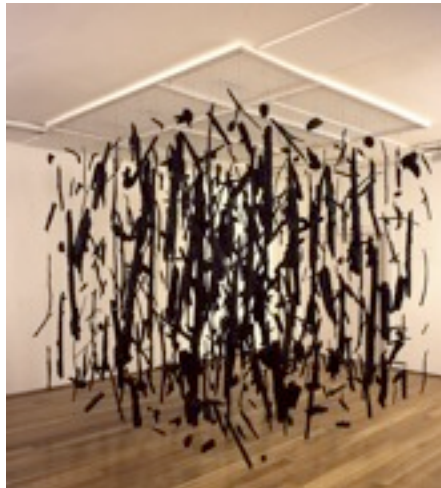


Fig 7 Cornelia Parker *Heart of Darkness* 2004

Taking into account international transport and travel, the use of environmentally challenging materials to make works and all the energy and material consumption involved in staging an art exhibition of the types discussed it could be easy to decide that the whole enterprise is futile. In preparing the ground in his catalogue essay for *Radical Nature*, Demos finds that:

"One might conclude that eco-art exhibitions are simply unviable from an environmental perspective. Yet if this response is both inadequate and unrealistic - as much as it would be to insist on immediately discontinuing all unsustainable technologies, rather than working gradually towards a state of sustainability - we need at the very least to consider just what justifies the continuation of unsustainable art exhibitions committed to the subject of sustainability."⁴¹

I hear a call for negotiating the problems not a reason to back away.

³⁹ www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/gsk-contemporary-season-2009/ 16.01.10

⁴⁰ Bunting op cit

⁴¹ Demos op cit p19

CRADLE TO CRADLE

Whilst browsing the Barbican bookshop after seeing *Radical Nature* I discovered a book which has given me hope: *Cradle to cradle - re-making the way we make things*.⁴² The authors Michael Braungart and William McDonough offer practical solutions to my dilemmas. Braungart and McDonough, a chemist and an architect respectively, spend their time working with companies who want to reduce their environmental impact. Their book is written from a design perspective but I believe their principles can equally well be applied to contemporary visual art. They propose a cradle-to-cradle approach to making, as opposed to the cradle-to-grave paradigm that exists in the current industrial system.

The vast bulk of current industrial output is one way - cradle to grave - meaning that the raw materials used to create a particular product spend only a short period of time in use before being dumped. Surprisingly this definition includes materials which have been recycled, for example recycled polyester fleece fabric. Although a fleece jumper may be made from fabric whose material had previously been used to make plastic bottles, the jumper will only last a few years and then it too will end up in landfill. The recycling of the material has merely delayed the dumping stage of the process for a few short years.

Braungart and McDonough make an enlightening distinction between technological and biological mass (materials). Until the industrial revolution the earth's ecosystems contained only biological nutrients, then humans intervened and began to extract minerals from the earth synthesising them into materials that cannot safely be returned to the soil. They call these materials 'technological nutrients'. They state that:

"Cradle to cradle goes beyond the environmental chorus saying that growth is wrong and that it is virtuous to prune the pleasures we take in things like cars and shoes until there is no pleasure left. Cradle to Cradle is like good gardening; it is not about 'saving' the planet but about learning to thrive on it."⁴³

So they propose that product manufacturers (and this could easily be widened to include any maker including contemporary visual artists) should be responsible for ensuring that all nutrients remain in their appropriate cycle and do not contaminate each other. They coin the phrase - 'monstrous hybrids' for products that combine both types of nutrient in a way that makes it very difficult to extract them at the end of a product's life-span.

⁴² Braungart M and McDonough W *Cradle to Cradle - Remaking the way we make things* Vintage London 2009

⁴³ Braungart M and McDonough op cit p11

I was indeed right to be suspicious of my pencil. It is, after all, a monstrous hybrid.

Braungart and McDonough advocate putting the questions of the greenhouse effect on the practical level of 'let's not be stupid' rather than 'be ethical'.⁴⁴ They counsel: "Don't make it an ethical problem make it a quality of life problem. Whatever you do look at the quality of what you do".⁴⁵ This approach provides a way out of the ever lengthening chain of responsibility intimated in my pencil dilemma and could provide a solution to the difficulties that were raised by *Biospheres* and *Heart of Darkness*. It requires however, a change in mind-set from my entrenched, consumption focussed, eco-guilt.

One final concept proposed by Braungart and McDonough which sheds light on my dilemma is that of 'up - cycling'. As indicated by the plastic bottle to fleece jumper example, recycling is effectively down-cycling as the material is downgraded in the process of reuse. My instinct to date has been to only use materials for my work which are recycled or recyclable. By focussing primarily on the 'recycle' part of the 'reduce, reuse, recycle' waste reduction mantra, I had missed the two more powerful elements of this triad. Producers, including artists, must build in ways to reduce, reuse and up-cycle the materials they use in their work.

STUFF

By their very nature, artists who allow consideration of consumption to merely inform their practice rather become the subject of it are difficult to unearth. The last artist I shall consider here could be argued to be at the leading edge of the direction in which environmentally responsible visual art might go.

As evidenced by *As if by Magic*, Kay Pallister's curatorial practice has a tendency to question the reasons for and dubious necessity of making extraneous stuff. The roots of this questioning are founded in her experience of working to salvage possessions in the clear up after Hurricane Andrew which had a profound effect on her ideas about the necessity of the art object. ⁴⁶ Pallister works closely with the artist Richard Wright whose work is described in the Turner Prize 09 catalogue thus:

⁴⁴ Braungart M and McDonough op cit p12

⁴⁵ ibid

⁴⁶ Pallister Kay *Visting artist lecture* Bath Spa University 10.12.08

“Wright’s transient practice embraces fragility, erosion and disappearance as the natural conclusion of reaction...temporality appears as a solution to an anxiety of permanence represented by the institutions and the way art is valued....For what he creates is an ‘event, a proposition that neither remains nor modifies the place it rested once it ceases to exist; it leaves no trace’”⁴⁷



Fig 8 Richard Wright untitled 2009

Wright’s untitled 2009 Turner Prize winning work, a huge gold leaf ‘fresco’ covered one wall of the Tate Britain gallery in which it was installed (Fig 8). The work took four weeks to complete and was removed and painted over as soon as the exhibition was over.⁴⁸ The amount of material consumed relative to the size of the work was small, the work required no transportation, required no energy to operate and the experience of viewing it was truly beautiful, engaging and open. Even though Wright makes no profession of environmental concerns in his work I believe of all the artists mentioned thus far he comes the closest to explicating my dilemma.

Whilst I could take wider and wider surveys of other artists’ ways of dealing with materiality I ultimately have to make a decision based on my own values, instinct and thought. This personal quest to establish the best outlet for my creativity has lead me to a different conclusion than I had expected. I had been concerned that I may decide never to make work again but that has not been the case.

The eco-worrying part of my brain is resistant to the consumption of materials in general, and in the making of art works in particular. However there is another part that can be enthralled

⁴⁷ *Turner Prize 09* Tate Publishing London 2009 p23

⁴⁸ Artist Wright wins Turner Prize’ news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8399111.stm 16.01.10

by the experience of being with artworks such as those by Richard Wright and knows that art has an important place in culture. Given Braungart and McDonough's proposals for an effective way forward I can re-examine the rules by which I make my work.

As it was ecosophy that provided me with the illustration of the blueberry dilemma so it is ecosophy that enables me to move forward in creating my own criteria based on its central precept of "self realisation for all living beings".⁴⁹

I subscribe to the existential tenet that individuals come into the world with nothing and must construct a meaning for themselves. Rather than taking this to be hopeless and nihilistic, I find in this the positive, the scope for choosing actions that enhance my own and the wider environment. So I will continue to make my artwork by incorporating a cradle to cradle strategy, and a sustained sensitivity to materials and places.

6214 words

⁴⁹ Cocola Jim 'Ecosophy from T to X' *n+1 magazine* April 2006 viewed at www.nplusonemag.com/ecosophy-t-x 19.11.09

APPENDIX

Ecosophy is a term used by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess to differentiate his ecocentric environmental philosophy from that of the prevailing anthropocentric mode of viewing the environment.

Naess proposed that individuals must each create their own set of rules as illustrated in his book *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* from the introduction to which the following extracts come:

“it is important to realise that Naess is less interested in building a system to explain all, than he is in teaching us to develop our own systems in our own ways; incomplete perhaps, but so necessary for us to reach real and grounded similar conclusions - not the least of which is realising that change must begin at once.”⁵⁰

“The intention is to encourage readers to find ways to develop and articulate basic, common intuitions of the absolute value of nature which resonate with their own backgrounds and approaches. The recognition of the problem and its subsequent study using philosophical methods is called ecophilosophy. More precisely, it is the utilisation of basic concepts from the science of ecology - such as complexity, diversity and symbiosis - to clarify the place of our species within nature through the process of working out a total view.”⁵¹

Jim Cocola’s article *Ecosophy from T to X*⁵² set out to review a ten volume set titled *The Selected Works of Arne Næss* published in 2005 but in the process he gives a concise history of Naess’ life and work.

⁵⁰ Naess Arne *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* Cambridge University Press 1990 p5

⁵¹ Naess *ibid* p3

⁵² Cocola Jim ‘Ecosophy from T to X’ *n+1 magazine* April 2006 viewed at www.nplusonemag.com/ecosophy-t-x 19.11.09

IMAGE LIST

- Fig 1 Michael Landy *Break Down* 2001
source: www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2001/break_down_slideshow_the_deconstruction/18
- Fig 2 *As if by Magic* installation view
source: email contact with Samar Martha at ArtSchool Palestine
- Figure 3 Richard Long *Stone Line* 1980 installation view at *Heaven and Earth*
source: www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/gallery/2009/jun/01/richard-long-tate-britain?picture=348216764
- Figure 4 Agnes Dene *Wheatfield - A Confrontation* 1982
source: *Radical Nature - Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* Barbican Art Gallery and Koenig Books London 2009 p92
- Figure 5 Peter Adams *King Neptunes Beads* 2009
source: www.windgrove.com/blog/a-peek-into-four-months-of-an-artists-life/
- Figure 6 Cornelia Parker *Heart of Darkness* 2004
source: www.fadwebsite.com/wp-content/uploads/gsk-contemporary-earth-cornelia-parker-heart-of-darkness-929x1024.jpg
- Figure 7 Tomás Saraceno *Biospheres* 2009
source: get.edidomus.it/domus/extrasensor/contentmanager/big/tomas_saraceno1_800x1201.shkl.jpg
- Figure 8 Richard Wright Turner prize installation 2009
source: i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2009/12/08/article-1234013-07833B7D000005DC-530_964x585.jpg

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