



## On Developing an Art and Ecology Curriculum

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# ON DEVELOPING AN Art and Ecology Curriculum

**D**eveloping an ecological art curriculum for the public schools is important to help reframe the way we think about the earth in the late 20th century. Since the inception of the industrial revolution, we have lost awareness of our symbiotic relationship with the Earth. We have separated ourselves from the Earth, placing nature in the position of other, to be conquered. As Suzi Gablik states, "In modern times, the basic metaphor of human presence on the Earth is the bulldozer" (1991, p. 77).

The current notion of nature does not equate with spirituality of any kind. Rather, the predominant view of nature is that it consists of a collection of raw materials to be exploited—natural resources. The rapid expansion of capitalist development, not only in our own country but throughout the world, is further wiping out possibilities for our students to have positive contact with the Earth. Therefore, they need opportunities to understand what is happening to the Earth that they will be inheriting from us.

An art curriculum that deals with ecological issues can empower students with the understanding that they, as creative individuals, can have an active voice in protecting their environment and changing current devastating ecological trends. This can be accomplished by developing, through artistic and other activities, new and positive metaphors for the human presence on Earth. We have "othered" the Earth long enough and, in the process, have become deeply alienated from nature.

To accomplish these goals, we need to recognize the importance of enlarging the boundaries of art teaching to develop curricula that investigate the areas, the borders, where humans interact with nature. Such curricula would cause students to stop and reflect on questions such as: How and why do human/nature interactions take place? Who benefits from the interactions and in what ways? What are the long-lasting implications of the interactions? Can there be positive changes in the ways these interactions take place? How much control do we have to make changes in these interactions? These are all

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valid questions around which art education programs can be built. The importance of students learning how to critique these issues cannot be overstressed.

Along with the above questions, another important area to be included in an art and ecology program is a study of the efforts of various artists working within ecological realms. These artists have helped to define and, in some instances, create solutions to our ecological problems, while redefining the role of art within society. The integration of disciplines involved in this type of art-making places everything that education has to offer on the table and is limited only by the extent of human ingenuity and creativity.

#### A SURVEY OF RECENT ECOLOGICAL ART

Artists throughout history have sought metaphors in nature to define human existence. For instance, since the beginning of agrarian society, representations of the sacred tree have been used by artists of all cultures and through many periods of art to affirm nature's powers of renewal. By contrast, Thomas Cole's 19th-century American landscape paintings featured a new representation of the sacred tree, as tree stump, depicting the widespread loss of virgin forest and the fallacy of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny (Matilsky, 1992). Cole's theory of landscape implied that, lacking the great cathedrals of Europe, the untouched wilderness of the American west was what gave moral and spiritual meaning to American life. He was one of the first European-American artists to mourn within his art the destruction of the land and to warn against the advances of civilization:

We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly... The beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. (McCoubrey, 1965, p. 109)

In the 100-plus years from Cole's time in the mid-19th century to the middle of the 20th century, ecological concerns expressed through art-making were almost nonexistent. Then, in the 1960s, something started happening. The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement served to politicize people from all walks of life. In 1962, Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, warning us that nature does not operate in isolation from human actions, that pollution of the ground water means total pollution. People began to worry about effects of pollutants that the chemical and nuclear industries were creating.

In the late '60s, a few artists began to confront environmental problems with direct action, producing proposals and work that not only evoked concern over the environment, but actually created and carried out solutions to specific problems. Chief among those to pursue this agenda early on were Joseph Beuys in Germany and Helen and Newton Harrison in the United States. Postmodern ecological art, signaling a renewed interest in the health of the Earth, slowly began to flower.

Helen and Newton Harrison work together as a team, producing art that comes face to face with very complicated questions: What effects will deforestation have upon tropical ecosystems? How devastating is an oil spill? What are the driving dynamics of global warming or of the hole in the

ozone? They propose local solutions to these global problems, as in their *Breathing Space for the Sava River*, in the former Yugoslavia, where they designed "green zones" for one of the most polluted rivers in Eastern Europe. They create installations consisting of plans, maps, diagrams, drawings, photographs and descriptions (Adcock, 1992). Few of their proposals have actually been carried out, but in recent years they have started getting calls from various governmental planning agencies, both inside and outside the United States, asking for their input on specific ecological problems.

Joseph Beuys, one of the founders of the German Green Party, had an even broader agenda, the Social Sculpture (Stachelhaus, 1987). Central to this agenda is the notion that Beuys referred to as "everyone an artist," the idea that everyone, professional artist or not, is capable of creating positive change within his or her own environment. At the 1982 Documenta, an exhibit held every 5 years in Kassel, Germany, Beuys started his *7,000 Oaks* project. His goal was to plant trees, coupled with columns of basalt, first throughout the city and then in other places in the world. This was a work that went well beyond the traditional space and time boundaries of art (oak trees take a very long time to mature), with one object being that art must take the long view. One of the residents of Kassel has related how *7,000 Oaks* gave a park back to the residents of her apartment building. Their park had been turned into a parking lot by the city, but when the building residents heard about the "Beuys trees" as they called them, they decided to go out one night and plant 14 of them in the parking lot, turning it back into a park. The city did nothing and the residents were allowed to keep

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their park, "since everyone knows who Beuys is" (Halpern, 1984). In this way, Beuys used himself as a collector and transformer of power, demonstrating that social sculpture also works through giving or lending power to people who have none.

Following Beuys's lead, Mierle Ukeles became the self-appointed artist in residence of the New York City Sanitation Department in 1978 (Phillips, 1989). Unlike other major U.S. cities, New York cannot send its solid waste anywhere else. As a result, the disposal of garbage is a growing problem that will probably reach crisis levels there before most other cities. Garbage disposal is something that takes place out of sight, but Ukeles works to make sure that it is not out of mind. She has generated a wide range of projects involving not only the community of sanitation workers but also the collection process and the garbage itself. Her efforts to increase the public's awareness of the connectedness of all urban and natural systems focus around the idea that landfills affect our water quality.

I'm not talking about artists decorating landfills, but about artists sitting at the decision-making table and turning these places into the design that will save our earth, our air, our

water. If we survive, people will look back and say, "That's the great design of our age." (Cembalist, 1991, p. 105)

By working where she works and focusing attention on the people and materials of waste, Ukeles has radically redefined public art, providing a forum for creative intervention and a way for the public and private, life and art to connect.

Working in the same vein as the Harrisons, Mel Chin's proposed project *Revival Field* (1990) uses plants called hyper-accumulators to absorb toxins from contaminated soil (Cembalist, 1991). He designed his project with the help of heavy-metals specialist Rufus Cheney from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who has admitted that he was surprised and delighted that an artist took an interest in a pet project of his that had been shelved since 1980 for lack of funding.

David Hanson is a teacher and photographer who in 1985-86 produced *Waste Land*, an aerial study of hazardous waste sites throughout the United States (Gablik, 1991). These sites are ones not normally available to our view, such as the Atlas Asbestos Mine in California and United Scrap Lead in Ohio. From approximately 40,000 of these sites,

Hanson chose 65 to photograph. Exhibited with topographic maps of the sites and descriptive texts taken from Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) descriptions, these photos tell the historic and social realities of these landscapes produced by the chemical industries; they are causing the destruction of the Earth's ecology.

Photography is also the final form for most of the work of both Ana Mendieta and Andy Goldsworthy. Mendieta (1948-1985) was a Cuban-American feminist artist who worked with various images of the body as a shape pressed into the Earth, or made of earth or other natural substances, such as water, fire, ashes, leaves or flowers. She was among the first artists to bring ritual into the museum and to take the museum outside, making many of her pieces at various places around the world, in riverbeds or at sacred sites (Love, 1996). Her work presents us with the undeniable that we are of the Earth, and that humans can have a mutually enhancing relationship to the Earth. It also reminds us of the fact that colonialism has caused a disturbing global imbalance that has taken us away from that point of view.

Andy Goldsworthy, an English artist living in Scotland, works directly with nature as the subject, tapping into the natural, cyclical processes (Gablik, 1991). His work is not dominating, but unobtrusive, delicate and ephemeral. Working without tools, he finds his materials at the outdoor sites he chooses to work in, adapting himself to the landscape and seasons. Some examples of his work are: lattices of horse chestnut leaves stitched together with grass, fresh green grass with white stems placed sunburst style around the circumference of a hole, and snow sculptures. His work usually blows away or melts or is displaced by wind or rain,

sometimes after only minutes of existence. He tries to photograph the work before nature reclaims it, before the moment of dispersal.

Nancy Rubins uses recycled materials to produce her work. Even though she is neither consistent nor explicit in addressing ecological issues, her work speaks implicitly to these issues on a very material level. For example, her piece *Worlds Apart* (1982) was a 45-foot tall assemblage of discarded appliances that was installed for 3 months alongside the Whitehurst Freeway in Washington, D.C., just blocks from the Watergate complex, causing enormous public uproar (Duncan, 1995). It seems that, although people do not mind buying and discarding material goods at a tremendous rate of turnover, they don't want to see them transformed into art that reminds them of the incredible wastefulness of that system. Ironically, *Worlds Apart* resembled a large tree, hearkening back to the "sacred tree" of earlier times, but now transmuted into a gigantic and horrific symbol of our present consumer society.

## CONCLUSION

I do not want to imply with this brief survey that these are the only artists working in these modes or on these issues, but to simply give a sense of the diversity of ecological art currently being made and the kinds of ideas around which curricula could be built. Diversity is the important idea here and is as important in the teaching of art as it is in the ecology of the world itself. The survival of our species may well depend upon how our students approach and think about these important issues and the creative solutions they come up with for positively reconnecting to nature.

There have been some recent attacks from industry regarding the validity of teaching environmental awareness in public schools. The focus of these attacks has been on whether or not factual information is being given to students. This is an important issue and can be easily addressed by doing a little research. There are many Internet sources for environmental information, much of it published by the federal and various state governments via the various Departments of Environmental Protection and also by the National Science Foundation. These sources can be considered reliable and can be accessed by typing in key words, such as "ozone depletion map," "recycling," or "groundwater pollution." These sources can also be contacted by mail and many have free information that they will send you.

Ecological art has a social function in addition to its aesthetic function. The implication of the ideas presented here is that if art is to be active in the social domain, material and moral responsibility become issues in the making. The decision to teach art in this way comes down to whether we view art as separate from or integrated with our lives and the issues that affect our lives. This is a question that artists and philosophers have struggled with for centuries. It has become increasingly clear that, as we move closer to the obliteration of nature on this planet, we need to broaden the boundaries of art, to free ourselves from the oppressed view that the only valid art is disconnected from material and moral responsibility. The present aesthetic-only tendencies that govern our art-making and teaching need to be enhanced and possibly replaced by art-making and teaching that embodies and actualizes our concern for Earth and for one another. By doing so, we recognize that the ecologi-

cal domain is our bridge from the material to the spiritual. Maintenance of this bridge involves encouraging our students to think about the ecology of the Earth in a creative mode. Not only will they become aware of the problems that they will be facing, they will also learn to recognize that they have power and creative options for solving these problems. If this change could take place beginning at the level of education in the arts it would open up possibilities for a new way of thinking about how we construct our cultural and social order. As Suzi Gablik has written, "the notion of art embodying a good act really changes the name of the game" (1989, p. 32).

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