

Conference Reviews

Reviews of the conference that appear on various blogs, websites and publications will be posted below.

POST The Journal for Arts Culture & Research

Written by Monica Longhorn

www.postjournal.org

Somerset Artsworks, August 2008

Written by Val Fellows

Following Artful Ecologies¹ conference in 2006, the theme of 2 was: With our environment in crisis, what role for art? UCF was a perfect setting for 2/3 days of lectures and presentations, it began in the Maritime Museum, with the keynote presentation from Dr. Hildegard Kurt, a cultural researcher whose work focuses on art and sustainability. The programme included evening boat trips to dine in botanical gardens; who could not respond to the SOS call of nature?

The international speakers were drawn from the fields of Art, Science, Philosophy, Politics and Ecology. Cross-fertilization of ideas was encouraged by an exhibition wall for delegates, where everyone could meet; view current projects and engage with the artists. The lectures proved to be an emotional roller-coaster, despair one minute, exhilaration the next. To grieve at humanity's stupidity and to simultaneously marvel at its artistic expression, ensured our engagement with the topic. Research combined with creative thinking, the disciplines of art and science have to work together; the outcomes are exciting and could prove essential to survival. For me the highlights were seeing excerpts from the beautiful films of Andrej Zdravic, the life of a river filmed from the inside.; and reports from the Cape Farewell project, sound artist Max Eastley recording a bearded seal singing underwater!

Just in case this sounds like a holiday, the questions posed remain with us to be answered, via our practice, if we can. Linda Weintraub sees artists as 'Free Radicals', agents of change having a role in showing new values need to be adopted in the future. Dave Pritchard posed the question; "How can artists help environmental bodies do their work better?" Alan Sonfist addressed us with "How do you open a door in yourself?" and "How do you connect with the environment?" Two poetic responses: "A poem or sculpture can bridge the gap of experience between people and land". From Alan Bolden's aesthetics – taking in the world through the senses; eating an apple, when the apple is no longer part of the environment – but part of you.

A quote from Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management; "The arts help us to understand the environmental problems facing the world today, and suggest and bring some of the solutions within reach, on a human scale. They tell stories and paint pictures, which inform, inspire and show how things can be changed by the actions of individuals with a common purpose."

"How does Ecological Art work in an urban environment?" a delegate questioned, as I still grapple with my question from the last conference: "How can the experience of environmental art engender ecological concern in the spectator?" It is important that ecological crises are not merely subject matter for arts practitioners, but challenges that need meeting head-on with artists providing the interface between differing parties such as scientists, politicians, and the public. I see this is one of the functions of such a cultural meeting point as the conference, dialogues continue via RANE.

Opening Spaces Blog:

Posted by 'throughstones'

<http://throughstones.wordpress.com/2008/07/28/artful-ecologies/>

The second conference on Art, Nature and Environment organised by the RANE research cluster at University College Falmouth took place recently. We can no longer ignore the mass of evidence from around the globe that points to a catastrophic future for humanity unless we change our ways pretty fast.

I won't go into detail. We have all heard the rumblings about massive extinction of species; vast areas of the earth rendered uninhabitable, pollution, famine... in short, a pretty tough time all round. This conference at Falmouth centred on the ecological crisis that threatens us today, and the artist's role in facing the situation, and encouraging desperately needed changes in lifestyle and behaviour.

The keynote speaker, **Dr. Hildegard Kurt**, spoke about her current research project 'Concerning the Spiritual in Sustainability'. "Our western industrial lifestyle is killing the world, and what we think of as growth is, in fact a death process," she said. "Without death there is no transformation, but not every death is transformative".

She spoke of a lost balance - of ruthless and relentless chopping of trees; of monstrous agricultural practices that do not care whether sufficient time is being left for new humus to form. We need to let go of our current mindset... but also take in new ideas and possibilities.

What values are important if we are going to survive among other species? And how can we use artists? **Linda Weintraub**, author, artist and curator, and a prominent figure in the field of art and ecology, reminded us that artists have always challenged norms - it is a measure of their greatness. And today, they are ideally placed to play the role of 'free radical' and thus facilitate change...

Humans CAN revitalise the land. Linda Weintraub spoke engagingly of a piece of land she bought some years ago, mainly for the beautiful view, and finding it, in fact, derelict - she set about bringing it to life again, regenerating the ecosystem, until today it is abundant with life, and pretty well supporting her entire family of several generations.

Here is a selection of the speakers, who together, reflected the immense range of approaches and practices within the field of art and ecology.

Alan Boldon, Director of Arts & Ecology at Dartington college of Arts, reminded us that when artists are working well, they become indistinguishable from their environment. Artist, material and surroundings become one. He encouraged collaboration, and a deep listening and close attention to place.

Brandon Ballengée, an artist whose practice explores the boundaries between art, science and technology, spoke of his work with amphibians, illustrated with exquisite prints from his researches. He showed how amphibians are disappearing around the world, and in those that are born, deformities are increasing at what seems like a phenomenal rate.

Dave Pritchard, an influential arts and environment specialist, talked of his recently published National Review for the Forestry Commission, in relation to their policies on arts involvement - advocating a more cohesive and interdisciplinary approach to their environmental policy and action, and that artist should be an assumed component of this.

Vicky Long (manager) and **Max Eastley** (sound artist) gave us an insight into the Cape Farewell Project that has led five expeditions of artists, scientists and educators into the High Arctic. We heard the haunting sounds of wild creatures emerging out of Arctic silence. We were reminded of the necessity to look and listen, and to re-imagine our relationship with nature.

Andrej Zdravic, film maker and sound artist, talked of beauty and sustained attention to detail. We cannot preach ecology through words alone, he said. His films have no narrative: nature itself is the story. Zdravic's work is about the state of nature and the mind, and we were swept away with the overwhelming power of nature in a screening of 'Riverglass'. The film took four years in the making.

Many important philosophical and practical questions were raised by other speakers: How do we inhabit our senses? How big is 'here'? Who is art for? Interdependency, and what is the most important thing the artist can do now to heal the whole? I, for one, was left with a massive amount of new material to think about and digest, which will strongly influence my output from now on.

There seemed to be two main threads running through the conference: questions concerning introspection as opposed to activism... and questions about what exactly it means to be an artist in these ecologically critical times.

A number of speakers stressed the need to slow down, for deep listening and reflection. Against this, artist and activist **John Jordan** (co-founder of Reclaim the Streets) urged radical activism: "The question of art is no longer one of aesthetics, but of the survival of the planet". I felt less than comfortable with remarks such as this, for several reasons – but I certainly did see what he was getting at.

A quote by Alan Boldon, from James Hilton, the renowned psychologist, stuck in my mind: "Beauty astounds and pulls the heart's focus towards the object, out of ourselves, out of this human-centred insanity, towards wanting to keep the cosmos there for another spring and another morning. This is the ecological emotion, and it is aesthetic and political at once." That made sense to me.

Words, more words, definitions and quotes - about art, science, technology, contemplation, activism – they are all interesting and useful. They help us figure out what we are dealing with, and map out the terrain – but the map is not the territory. We are all working in the field in our own way, and it seems to me there are two absolute essentials: close and sustained attention, and the ability to respond fluidly, moment by moment, to whatever the situation demands. Artists and creative practitioners of all descriptions are particularly well-skilled in this, and have a crucial role to play. Who else would have launched the famous and influential 'Reclaim the Streets' campaign? And who else, as one of the speakers, **Alan Sonfist** did, as a very young man 40 odd years ago, would have approached the Mayor of New York, and persuaded him to make a forest in the middle of the city. (*'Time Landscape', eventually realised in 1978.*)

"The truth lies within yourself, and can only come through you. Position yourself where you feel comfortable in order to bring forth your truth." *Alan Sonfist.*

That's the end of my eco moment. I have barely scratched the surface of this important conference – just pulled out a few strands that seemed significant. If anyone is interested, I can tell you where to get more info – but for now, I am off to lie under the trees by the river.

WEM Magazine, September 2008

Written by Erika Yarrow

Bring on the free-thinkers!

'Artful Ecologies 2', a three-day arts and ecology conference run by RANE (Research in Art, Nature and Environment) at University College Falmouth, has left my head spinning with ideas, a vast reading list that covers psychology, ecology, politics, theology and, of course, the arts. But, above all, it has given me a feeling of optimism and a firm belief in the ability of humankind to create better ways of living.

This may be surprising when you consider the title of the keynote speech given by the cultural researcher and author, and co-founder of the institute for Art, Culture and Sustainability in Berlin, Dr Hildegard Kurt, who opened the event with a lecture on 'Being an artist in a dying world.' Not much room for optimism there you would think. However, what came from her lecture was the elemental nature of change, that it is continuous and has a transformative effect. The planet, nature, human life, all are evolving constantly. Our cultural fear of death, ageing, change, is based on the ego. Too easily we turn to ourselves. With less emphasis on the 'self' - we are, after all, only part of the process of life - we can look at the world differently, engage in new ways and develop a new relationship with our environment.

It is true that the Earth is in crisis, or rather, mankind's relationship with the planet on which he depends. But we are capable of change. The first step is to acknowledge fully the urgency and extent of change required. Too frequently adaptation to climate change is discussed as part of an extended planning process, something to aspire to, a target to be met at some point in the distant future. Few dare to speak of the speed and extent of change required and the possibility that Homo-sapiens may not survive this challenge.

Artist and activist John Jordan pulled no punches during his presentation, relaying the message of the chief scientific advisor to Angela Merkel, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber - in the artist's own words of course - that unless we change radically our way of living in the next eight years 'the world ends in 2050.' That

is, the world's capacity to sustain human life. The world can carry on without us just fine, after all.

Now this statement is not new to me. But it is one that I push to the recesses of my mind in order to stay positive. I have often felt exasperated by the knowledge that global leaders know this and yet fail to act on or even discuss this possibility. And from experience, I too have learned to keep this secret, knowing that such utterances to friends and family leave those close to me thinking that I am either crazy or prone to exaggeration. The truth is that no one wants to even consider the worst case scenario. But here, in a room full of artists, I found people prepared to speak the unspeakable and that were optimistic of our ability to adapt.

John Jordan's work merges art and performance with activism and the social engagement of politics. He is not concerned with representing a world in crisis, but with creating change. He spoke with passion about his work. What struck me was the extent to which he and many others like him are prepared to go to save us from ourselves. In order to give future generations a chance, activists risk arrest, imprisonment, criminal records and police raids.

Following William Morris in the tradition of art immersing itself in social activism, pre-figurative politics is central to John Jordan's work. 'We are not going to wait for the politics we want, we are going to create it now,' he says. 'What changes the world are stories that make our imagination come alive. The history of humanity may be terminated by too many acts of obedience. We need militant optimism.'

Jordan's form of activism is creative and engaging - people reclaiming the streets from cars and using them as commons, closing the M40 and planting saplings in the asphalt. One lasting image I have from the conference is that of a row of environmental activists dressed as clowns embracing a row of police. This was footage of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army. By using clowning, Jordan and his rebel clan break down dualisms and bring spectacle and play into the political arena. The Climate Camps around the country, such as that at Kingsnorth power station, give all concerned about climate change the opportunity to be creative, engaged and political.

Clowning is one method of divorcing oneself from the ego. For sound artist Max Eastley, an exploration to the High Arctic with Cape Farewell was a humbling experience that led him to question what it is to be a human being in the environment. His recordings of bearded seals taken during this trip have a deeply moving, penetrating quality, which has the ability to communicate the primal relationship between man and his environment.

Film-maker Andrej Zdravic described how he has managed to achieve an almost subservient relationship to nature in his work, allowing nature to control and command it. 'I am humble in the face of nature,' he says. 'When you look at volcanoes erupting you feel like you are witnessing the start of the world.' He continues: 'I don't think you can preach ecology with words or talking about problems or threats of lost species. These messages are striking, but they don't stick.'

There are as many kinds of artists as there are people and ways in which art can embrace the environment. Brandon Ballengee's approach is science-based. He is engaged currently in research into the possible causes of falling amphibian numbers and the increase in deformities to be found in them. Possible causes are parasites and compromised immune systems.

Unlike mammals, amphibians are immersed in the environment from day one and so are an important indicator of environmental changes and conditions. The artist, as well as undertaking field studies, has created a wet lab at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park which is open to the public. He has learnt to clear and stain specimens and is generating large-scale prints of these extraordinarily deformed creatures.

Whatever the approach, the majority of the artists giving presentations demonstrated a remarkable ability to look at a subject with fresh eyes. Artist and environmentalist Alan Sonfist explains this by saying: 'Artists don't necessarily start a project knowing the formula. They have to work out the formula.'

There is great value to be had from stepping back from our specialisms, exchanging ideas with those out of our sector, if only to realise that what we consider to be the norm; is not that to others. Linda Weintraub an author, artist and curator based in New York, describes artists as 'free-radicals, disruptive

forces, agents of change,' with a vital role to play in the face of climate change precisely because they do not have the protocols of other professionals.

To prevent catastrophic climate change we need radical approaches, creative thinkers and new takes on normality. How many times have we heard phrases such as 'think-outside-the-box' from people who are imprisoned by the language, structure and discipline of their profession? Einstein said that we can not solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. I say, bring on the free-thinkers.