

# Art, Place and the Meaning of Home

## Introduction

While it may seem that artists and curators all over the world are jumping on what one reviewer in the UK called “the environmental bandwagon”<sup>1</sup>, artists working with environmental issues and concerns is not a new phenomenon. Environmental and Ecological Art has been with us for almost 50 years, and for most of this time practitioners of Ecological Art and their works have been remarkably absent from both the mainstream art world and popular culture. It is only recent high profile cultural events, such as those linked with the 2009 Climate Change Summit at Copenhagen, that have raised the profile of and granted cultural legitimacy to artists and art works that specifically engage issues of environmental well-being. In light of the absence of Ecological Art from popular culture, it might be helpful to offer a brief description of and definition for the genre of Ecological Art, or EcoART.

Ecological Art, or EcoART, is a genre flexible and adaptive in form with no fidelity to particular mediums. Instead, it is informed by specific principles and theories. Its practitioners cross disciplinary boundaries with abandon. Collaborations with scientists, engineers and architects are common. Currently, there are several definitions for Ecological Art being debated by longtime practitioners and theorists in the genre. While these vary in their specifics due to a diversity of practices, they all state similar intentions and land on the same moral ground. Practitioners also agree that this art is primarily meant to do something in the world, to literally make positive change through the works, to promote such change, and to engage and inform the public. This is art for the sake of the world. Here is the definition I most often use:

“Ecological Art, or EcoART, is not simply art about, or in, the environment, but is work that addresses the well-being of ecosystems, the impacts humans have within ecosystems, the kind of relationships we have with the places where we dwell, and the other species with whom we share these places.”<sup>2</sup>

Explicit in this definition is the assumption that these practitioners and their works hold the premise that humans and our human cultures are inescapably part of an enviroing world much larger and more diverse than either. Along with this perhaps obvious premise is an understanding that we have a responsibility of relationship within this “ecosystem community” of which we are a part. While the relationship of human to world is implied in many art works, I know of no other genre that specifically embraces this ethical position and places it at the centre of practice.

Although many use the terms Environmental Art and Ecological Art interchangeably I do not, since not all Environmental Art conforms to the core principles that define Ecological Art.<sup>3</sup> In the words of Sam Bower, creator and director of *GreenMuseum*:

I believe that there is great usefulness to a term which distinguishes contemporary activist approaches from earlier land and earth art. I think "eco-art" (short for "ecological art") fits much of this contemporary work best.<sup>4</sup>

This essay considers the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project (SPEA) within the context of Ecological Art (EcoART). My interest in these works has less to do with form than with content, and is primarily in what these works may offer to, or reveal about the relationship between human cultural practices and our enviroing world.

There are in this essay terms that might be considered "slippery" in the sense that they hold multiple or diverse meanings. Before beginning, it might be helpful to explain the meanings of these terms within this context.

"Ecology" denotes the relationships between plants, animals (including humans) and their surroundings. (The science of Ecology studies these relationships.) I use this term, as well as "ecosystem community" to mean an intertwined and interdependent web of relationships, or community, of which everything in the enviroing world is a part<sup>5</sup> – including human cultures. I use "environment" to denote the world that environs us. In the context of this essay the term "culture", conforms best to meanings given in Anthropology<sup>6</sup>, denoting and embracing human traditions, ideologies, civilizations, and their beliefs and practices.

"Nature"<sup>7</sup> is a very slippery term and concept. It is not the same thing as "environment" or "ecology". Briefly, Nature is the primary term in Western cultures and traditions for what is other than human or human-made. In the course of this essay I may at times refer to "Nature" and to the "Nature-culture", or "human-Nature" relationship. Such references encompass problematic histories, as well as those attitudes arising from "Cartesian dualism"<sup>8</sup>. Since complex explanations of some terms would be too long for this introduction, please see the endnotes for additional information.

As I consider the works in Stanley Park and the premise of the project itself, I hope to make an argument that art, and specifically Ecological art, can and does contain the possibility for helping change the Nature-culture relationship – or our human relationship with our enviroing world – for the better by revealing and foregrounding the belonging of humans and human cultures within an ecosystem community. Such a revelation may prove invaluable, since if we are a part of an ecology, and not outside observing and acting upon a Nature that is alien to us (as we have been taught to think), then how we act or behave within this ecology or ecosystem community can be understood to have as immediate and significant an impact as do behaviours and choices within a familial relationship.

For most people, art has nothing in particular to do with ecology, or our relationship with environment, and the idea that the arts might be important to the Nature-culture relationship in any real or significant way seems especially difficult to defend. Contemporary art is often seen to comment on, observe, expose and reconfigure aspects of human culture, but for the vast majority of people, ecology seems to have little to do with culture and less to do with art.

Yet ecology, or environment, is where we live, where all life lives – it is where cultures live, where the arts and all human endeavours live, since culture also cannot be outside the world. Gyorgy Kepes, past professor at MIT, observed that the “creative imaginations and sensibilities” of artists “are neither self-generated nor self-contained: they belong to the larger environmental field of nature and society.”<sup>9</sup>

When the winter storms of 2006 significantly altered the familiar landscape of Stanley Park, the Vancouver Parks Board made some choices that were both prescient and brave. First they decided to approach the park as an urban forest, an ecosystem – which is by definition an intertwined and interdependent community. This provides a different conceptual framing for “park” that can change our perception of the place as well as our treatment of it. The other important choice was to initiate the creation of a series of environmental art works in Stanley Park.

While the place that is Stanley Park is no stranger to radical change, the changes brought about by these storms seemed especially significant. This significance arises in part from a love of the park as we have come to know it, from recent awareness of climate change, and from a growing sense of being part of a much greater ecological community. But the most significant thing, in terms of our better understanding our relationship with place and world, may be that these changes came about through agency outside the human, and at a time when the world seems unstable in ways that feel new to us. These changes were not intended by planners, by the city, not agreed to by the residents of Vancouver. Since we were clearly not in control of these changes, they were readily seen as some kind of disaster, or devastation.

Yet while we may not be in control, we are a part of environment, of storm, of causes, effects – and hopefully of creative and careful responses. Looked at through an alternate lens, the storms and their effects could be recognised as a shout, a loud demand for attention in an ongoing conversation we forgot we were having – and as an opportunity for responses within that conversation. That these responses must be creative and imaginative makes sense, since the ways we have approached ecological systems and environment from within this culture have been terribly limited. We may be forgiven for a certain collective confusion as to how to respond to an enviroing world (or Nature) we have configured as outside the purview of culture. We have been taught to think and believe certain things, and these ideas and beliefs are called into question by events and demands of much greater magnitude than we have been accustomed to expect. And in trying to see our way and move through this, while we need the sciences, we absolutely need artists and the arts.

Artists through their works can allow us to see anew even familiar places, and/or reveal stories about those places. In the case of the Stanley Park works, there is what I will call an ongoing collaboration within the artworks. The dialogue between place, materials and artist is more transparent than we are used to seeing, since the park ecosystem is a dynamic participant in the ongoing evolution as well as the creation of the works, which have been created with materials within the park ecology. These materials as components of the place itself are handled and re-imagined in new configurations by the artists, so they reveal or foreground aspects of the park and its stories.

From its inception, the project was about listening, or being attentive to the place that we call Stanley Park. The process is one of collaboration, since the place as an active living forest, replete with weather and species, is as intrinsic to these works as is any act of the artists on the project. If these works do anything, it is to foreground this relationship, the intertwining of culture and environment. When we experience these works as we walk in the forest, the place is revealed to us in ways that we would most likely not have otherwise noticed. The sensuous and intricate tangle of roots highlighted by Tanya Willard in her piece *Birth* resonates in our own bodies as the network of roots mirrors our own circulatory systems, viscera and neural pathways. The nutrients that nurture the body of the tree are the same as nurture our own. The connection is clear, and generates an understanding of this relationship through complex engagement on multiple levels.

John Hemsworth and Peter von Tiesenhausen's ephemeral work *Cedar* appeared as the bared bones of an ancient tree. It spoke of healing or completing a missing section of the giant cedar, and also of this absence as the stripped boughs curved like an empty rib cage bridging the gap in the fallen tree. The sense of loss and the desire to heal what has been damaged, the tenderness and the care are all palpable. Approaching the semi-permanent work by the same artists, *Listen*, one is enveloped in the scent of cedar, which clings long after one leaves the site. We carry the trace of the ancient tree with us, out of the forest and into the city. At the same location as the earlier work, *Listen* also completes the missing section of the tree while responding to the absence underlined by the earlier ephemeral work. This time it is not bare bones and absence we find – it is mystery and completion. The large sphere, blackened by fire, draws us in. Peering through cracks in the form we see a golden ball of cedar at its heart, holding the promise of new life as does a seed. The fallen cedar and the sculpture will together return to the forest to feed new growth. Pay attention. Listen. This is also who and what we are.

The collaborative works of Davide Pan & T'Uy'Tanat Cease Wyss range from the subtle to the substantial. A delicate interweaving of branches echoes both the tangle of rainforest brush and the weaving of baskets practiced by Coast Salish women. On a tree stump the names for indigenous plants are carved in both Coast Salish – the language of local pre-colonial human culture, and in English – the language of the dominant settler culture. Huckleberry has been planted within a tree stump to

foreground the new life nurtured by the body of this tree. Who could tell whether the wind, a bird, or a human hand aided in this process? These works speak of regeneration – of language, of knowledge of and relationship with place, and of being a part of the land in its regeneration. The sense is clear that people, the land, waters, plants are not separable one from the other, but are mutually reliant within an ecosystem community.

Similarly, the works of Shirley Wiebe – most obviously *Hibernators*, *Fringe* and *Cozy* – reveal and work with the place as culture and environment intertwined. Working with the more recent history of the park, her *Hibernators* – soft sculptures created from BioNet and woodchips from the park restoration – repopulate the derelict bear pit in the old zoo area. Amorphous in shape, they have a peculiar presence – ghostly reminders of the spectacle of a non-human Nature caged and controlled, represented by the bear who lived and died in confinement here. Unlike the bear, the *Hibernators* do not return our gaze. The bear pit, overgrown with trees and vines, is itself a relic and a ghost of its former self, returning to the forest.

The first works – ephemeral works, or works that live only a short time before seamlessly disappearing back into being environment from being culture or art – very effectively blur the line we draw between culture and environment. Beyond being themselves ephemeral in the sense of being transient, such works also stress the ephemeral nature of that line, as they blend and merge the two in their process.

All the works will change over time through the agencies of climate, insects, bacteria, fungi and creatures both four-legged and two-legged. These changes not only foreground the agency of the entire ecosystem community, but also the creative and collaborative nature of ecosystems. David Haley, head of the Arts & Ecology MA program at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK, draws a parallel between art and ecology. He believes that when it comes to art works, the art happens *in the process* (my emphasis), so that what is left at the end is a record, or trace of that process. While he is speaking here of the more “traditional” practices, such as drawing, it is important to note that even in the case of a drawing, or a painting – in contradistinction to a work on/with the land – the piece holds within itself and communicates the communion between artist and subject. It embodies relationship; it is relational, it is process. He also reminds us that ecology is a creative process, in the sense of continuously adapting and changing – it is dynamic, relational and not a static state. In this sense then, he points out, art and ecology may be recognized as the same<sup>10</sup>. I will add to this my observation that works such as these at Stanley Park most easily communicate or reveal this parallel of ongoing creative process, the murmuring in between environing world and cultural activity.

While it can be seen that this project offers something significant to our ongoing relationship with the local ecosystem community, the works also serve as ambassadors for the entire human cultural relationship with environment. One could use the familiar “think globally, act locally” phrase, but that is too trite for what these works, and this project, offer.

With recent global focus on climate change and species loss, we are seeing an upsurge in exhibitions such as *Radical Nature* at the Barbican in London this summer (2009). Alongside this a flurry of conferences, symposia, biennales and festivals from Italy to Sharja focus on the intersection of arts, culture and environment. Yet the mainstream artworld has a reputation (deserved or not) for being fickle and self-indulgent. Consequently some wonder if environmental concerns are simply a flavour of the month focus for the arts, doomed to vanish at any time in favour of the next. Or might it be that this is an opening, an important shift in arts and cultural ideologies and practices, a shift which recognizes that any practice can only take place within and with ecosystem community? Another question that comes to the fore asks whether the art industry is simply picking up on the current commodity value of environment as a topic to further its own interests – a kind of “greenwashing”? It is certainly the case that many of the works we are currently seeing about culture and environment while perhaps quite readily recognized as art works, may not qualify as being Ecological, or EcoART works.

It isn't my intention to undertake an investigation of these questions here, but to acknowledge that these questions are being raised, and to appreciate how works and practices such as these at Stanley Park differ from the commodity driven art industry in valuable ways. To paraphrase art sociologist Sacha Kagan, artists can either choose to make works that effect change in the world, or they can “continue to play in the sandbox of the art world”<sup>11</sup>. The artists and works of the Stanley Park Environmental Art project – along with the far-sighted Vancouver Parks Board – do much more than observe or comment on the nature-culture relationship, they acknowledge and engage with it, commenting on and seeking alternative configurations for that relationship. Knowing that we are a part of and that we belong in this relationship – absolutely belong – brings home the responsibilities of relationship. It also brings us home.

It seems appropriate to end this essay with a quote from an earlier piece, *Returning the Radiant Gaze*:

As all beings hold in themselves their genesis, so artworks bear witness to relations and correspondences outside Western notions of what is true or acceptable. Art opens the eyes of the heart, and the world returns our gaze. “Vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, “exterior”, foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together*...”<sup>12</sup> Choosing to acknowledge our innately inter-relational Being in the world is to welcome uncertainty, relinquishing illusions of control. It is to meet and return the radiant gaze of the world.<sup>13</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Madeline Bunting's *The Rise of Climate Change Art* in The Guardian UK, Wednesday 2 December 2009 21.30 GMT

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/dec/02/climate-change-art-earth-rethink>

<sup>2</sup> Carruthers, Beth (2006) Definition created for *Art As Ecology*©

<sup>3</sup> See one definition created by longtime practitioners at the *International EcoArt Network's* website: <http://www.ecoartnetwork.org/aboutus.htm>; and more on terms here at *GreenMuseum*: [http://greenmuseum.org/what\\_is\\_ea.php](http://greenmuseum.org/what_is_ea.php)

<sup>4</sup> See [http://greenmuseum.org/generic\\_content.php?ct\\_id=306](http://greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=306)

<sup>5</sup> As defined in the Oxford English Dictionary

<sup>6</sup> For example, Sir Edward Tylor writes on the first page of his 1897 book: "Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (quote sourced at Wikipedia)

Tylor, Edward. 1920 [1871]. *Primitive Culture*. New York: J.P. Putnam's Sons

<sup>7</sup> "Nature" is a term most often conflated with "environment", although non-human animals, for example, may be Nature, while not being environment. Nature is often thought of as what we humans act upon, something outside ourselves, yet we ourselves have "natures". Nature is perceived as somehow pure, unsullied – as in "natural foods", "natural goodness", or as an original state before humans tampered with that state. Nature is also seen as dangerous, ungovernable, wild and capricious. Some examples of Nature in this case would be storms, earthquakes, or wild animals. One does not have to go to great lengths to see that the relationship we have with Nature – both as a Nature whose meaning and being is defined by ourselves, and a Nature that is mysterious, ungovernable and not-us – is complex and conflicted. This is indicative of what is known as the "Nature-culture divide".

<sup>8</sup> "Rene Descartes argued that the mind and body are distinct and separate. This is the first point of Cartesian Dualism. According to Cartesian thought, man looks upon his world as a direct reflection of him, his values, beliefs, experiences, conditions and development. " (Source: What is Cartesian Dualism: Mind and Body as Distinct and Separate | Suite101.com [http://philosophy.suite101.com/article.cfm/the\\_concept\\_of\\_dualism\\_in\\_cartesian\\_dualism#ixzz0ZW65NWPm](http://philosophy.suite101.com/article.cfm/the_concept_of_dualism_in_cartesian_dualism#ixzz0ZW65NWPm))

In other words, in Cartesian thought humans are defined as human through mind and the ability to think, and the world is a projection of our minds. It exists for us according to what we project upon it. In this scenario the world outside the human mind does not exist in and for itself, but is only what we humans, through our thinking, create it as. If culture is a product of human intellect and mind, and humans are defined by mind, separate from the world or an external Nature, then not only is there a human-nature divide, but also a culture-nature divide.

<sup>9</sup> Kepes, Gyorgy (1972) "Art and Ecological Consciousness" in Kepes, Gyorgy ed. *Arts of the Environment* New York: George Braziller. p. 5

<sup>10</sup> Paraphrased from Haley, David (2008) "The Limits of Sustainability: the art of ecology" in Kagan, S. and Kirchberg, V. eds. *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures*, p. 147

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<sup>11</sup> Kagan, Sacha (2008) "Art Effectuating Social Change: double entrepreneurship" in Kagan, S. and Kirchberg, V. eds. *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures*, p. 147

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1964) "Eye and Mind" in *The Primacy of Perception* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p.187

<sup>13</sup> Carruthers, Beth (2003) *Returning the Radiant Gaze: vision and embodiment in a world of subjects*©. Unpublished paper. May be downloaded here:

[www.culturalcurrency.ca/RadiantGazeRevised3.pdf](http://www.culturalcurrency.ca/RadiantGazeRevised3.pdf)

### **Some Resource Links**

Centre for Contemporary Art & the Natural World [www.ccanw.co.uk](http://www.ccanw.co.uk)

GreenMuseum [www.greenmuseum.org](http://www.greenmuseum.org)

International EcoArt Network [www.ecoartnetwork.org](http://www.ecoartnetwork.org)

EcoArtSpace [www.ecoartspace.org](http://www.ecoartspace.org)

South Florida Environmental Art Project [www.SFEAP.org](http://www.SFEAP.org)

RSA Arts & Ecology (UK) [www.artsandecology.org.uk](http://www.artsandecology.org.uk)

RSA Arts & Ecology Blog [www.artsandecology.rsablogs.org.uk](http://www.artsandecology.rsablogs.org.uk)

The Centre for Sustainable Practice in the Arts (CalArts, USA)

<http://www.sustainablepractice.org>

Aviva Rahmani <http://www.ghostnets.com>

EcoArt Centre, Israel <http://eco-art.asia/home.asp?CL=ENG>

The Harrison Studio <http://www.theharrisonstudio.net>

Cape Farewell <http://www.capefarewell.com>