

ART, CULTURE AND ECOLOGY

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A number of recent artists have referenced environmental issues in their work. The most prominent was Joseph Beuys, who incorporated a commitment to political ecology and whose art was shaped by a mystical perspective, specifically alchemy and the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner. Other artists who have worked in this area in recent times include Walter de Maria (with his installation to attract lightning, using nature as a resource to produce the "sublime" effect of awe and danger), Andy Goldsworthy, (who works directly with nature as a means of highlighting its potential for beauty), Cornelia Hesse-Honneger, whose art documenting deformed creatures is a critique of environmental contamination, and Alan Sonfist, who focusses on the preservation of the natural environment. Other artists working in this area include: Brandon Ballengee, Yto Barrada, Mel Chin, Hermann de Vries, Mark Dion, Ines Doujak, Chris Drury, Peter Fend, Paul Fusco, Hamish Fulton, Jochen Gerz, George Gessert, Tue Greenfort, Hans Haacke, Helen and Newton Harrison, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Jorge Mario Jauregui, Patricia Johanson, Richard Long, Dennis Oppenheim, Michael Paha, James Pearce, Ann T. Rosenthal, Robert Smithson, Patrice Stellest, Erwin Timmers, James Turrell and Meg Webster (See Spaid; Lane/Kumar.)

Some of the issues that have arisen in the context of art and its relationship to the environment include, e.g., to what extent nature should be regarded as a resource or raw material for art works, as distinct from a revered, and

endangered, entity. Other issues include the relationship between aesthetic autonomy and political activism. Furthermore, environmental art can vary from work that directly raises eco-political issues in terms of diagnosis, to art that attempts to heal the humanity/nature split.

However, in spite of the strong influence of, for example, Beuys and 'land art', ecology has, until recently, been a relatively minor theme in 'fine art' practice. The reasons are probably many: the ongoing pervasiveness of irony; the post-modern attack on 'essentialism'; the focus on identity politics; the fascination with simulation at the expense of the real; the dominance of philosophical relativism; the historical split between ethics and aesthetics; a suspicion of nature-mysticism and Romanticism (and the perceived influence of these on the development of fascism). There is also a long-standing critical dismissal of didacticism, as well as an inward-looking emphasis often encouraged in art education.

Some of this art work raises issues of topical political concern, e.g. about genetic engineering (Doujak, Balengee) or the appropriateness of nuclear power as a response to the challenge of global warming (Fusco, Hesse-Honneger). The ongoing theme is the question whether nature is to be viewed as a resource to be exploited, or as the only home we have, to be cherished and revered. This theme is in turn related to the underlying question as to what ethical basis, if any, we have for environmental concern.

Outside of the specific area of 'fine art' (if such a context has any meaning any more) 'green design' has achieved increasing prominence in recent years. Furthermore, environmental desolation features prominently in popular film, including *Soylent Green*, *The Emerald Forest*, *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, *eXistenZ*, *Waterworld*, *The Day After*

Tomorrow, An Inconvenient Truth. However, despite the pervasiveness of ecological references in contemporary popular culture—and a growing focus in the area of ‘high culture’ as well—these issues have been hitherto marginal in cultural studies, and indeed in art theory, with the exception of a few key texts (e.g. Gablik)

ECOLOGY AND CULTURAL THEORY

The spectre of global warming is haunting the world. However, looking at much cultural theory to date with its focus on issues of truth, identity, gender and epistemology, one would hardly think it. Ecological issues have (relatively) seldom raised their heads in cultural theory, or even in mainstream art history/theory.

The questions of environmental ethics and epistemology are intertwined at a basic level. Environmental concern (e.g. about global warming or the threat to the rain forest) is based on the assumption that there is something real that is threatened—that there is an actual natural world to be observed, measured and quantified, independent of theoretical perspectives. In epistemological terms, there is a fundamental tension between ecologism and post-modernism, insofar as the latter questions what, if anything, we can know about a reality outside of discourse.

On the one hand, Verena Andermatt Conley deplores the dominance of Baudrillard-influenced thought foregrounding the concept of simulacra, as it occludes an ecological perspective (Conley 1997, p. 27). On the other hand, she praises Levi-Strauss who ‘calls into question the separation between nature and culture, between body and mind, and [who] especially rules out the concept of a static condition of

nature' (Conley, p. 42). Levi-Strauss, she points out, called for 'dehierarchized, pluralistic, and horizontal models' (p. 51).

In ethical terms, questions regarding the 'rights' of animals and nature raise issues concerning the centrality of the role of the human. That centrality has been called in question by post-structuralism, but usually in terms of foregrounding language rather than the natural environment.

In the era of global warming and environmental devastation, contemporary environmental philosophy clearly has important implications for cultural studies. Contemporary and recent issues in ecology arise from (e.g.) the writings of Kate Soper (philosophical realism), Arne Naess (self-realization and the intrinsic value of nature), Martin Heidegger (critique of technology), Suzi Gablik (spirituality) and Carolyn Merchant (eco-feminism). (Other figures in this area include Theresa Brennan, Fritjof Capra, Mary Mellor, Val Plumwood and Karen J. Warren.) Some key philosophical/literary names frequently feature in the background to these debates as well: e.g. Bateson, Goethe, the early Marx, Rousseau, Spinoza, Thoreau (Palmer 2001). One of the main issues in these contemporary discussions is the question of a basis for environmental ethics (Curry 2006). The question of ethical value in regard to the environment has important connections with the question of aesthetic values associated with the art and culture that references nature and the environment, and the resultant political implications as well.

Two key areas of discussion in the sphere of environmental ethics are eco-feminism and deep ecology. In the former, the crucial issue is the historical relationship between the domination of women and the domination of nature. In the latter, the tension between bio-centrism and human self-realisation comes to the fore.

ECO-FEMINISM

Carolyn Merchant notes how, historically, the metaphor of “dominion” spread from the religious to the social and political spheres—a mind-set that was made more intense by the scientific world-view that conceived of reality as a machine instead of an organism. As a consequence, the domination of nature as well as of women was authorized (Merchant 1990, pp. 3, xxi). Previously, the medieval theory of society had emphasized the whole, while stressing the value of each part: ‘The connection between the parts was integrated through a universal harmony pervading the whole’ (Merchant, p. 71). As Kate Soper points out, there is a correlation in the philosophical dualism of Descartes, which opposed God and nature, mind and body (Soper 1995, p. 43). In the terms of Val Plumwood, the human/nature dualism takes a separated reason as the basic characteristic of humans and places human life beyond an ‘inferiorised and manipulable’ nature (Plumwood 2002, p. 4). In the terms of Elizabeth Gross, the crisis of reason ‘is a consequence of the historical privileging of the purely conceptual or mental over the corporeal; that is, it is a consequence of the inability of western knowledges to conceive their own processes of (material) production, processes that *simultaneously rely on and disavow* the role of the body’ (Gross 1993, n.p., quoted in Plumwood, p. 4). Plumwood argues that the current dire situation is the result of a culture centred on reason and the human for at least two millennia, with a ‘contrived blindness to ecological relationships’ which is the basic cause of our destructive behaviour (p. 8).

One of the problems she finds is the rationalist divorce between rational prudence, coded as male, and ethics, coded as female (p. 9). Distinguishing rationalism from

reason (just as scientism is distinguishable from science) Plumwood defines rationalism as 'a doctrine about reason, its place at the apex of human life, and the practice of oppositional construction in relation to its "others", especially the body and nature, which are simultaneously relied upon but disavowed or taken for granted' (p. 18).

In Plumwood's terms, 'The sado-dispassionate is the dominant mode of the Rational Heroes in science and capitalism' (p.22) a perspective that may lead to its own limitations and distortions (p. 53). She argues that emotional neutrality in certain contexts (for example harmful experimentation) indicates a deep moral failing (p. 41). (This has economic implications as well, as in the notion of a 'free market' disembodied from social responsibility and ecological constraints) (p. 24). Subject/object dualism indicates a mechanistic view of nature devoid of 'agency, mind and purpose, a "clockwork" background to the master narrative of human consciousness and endeavour' (p. 46). Nature for the ancient Greeks was associated with such groups as slaves and women, in contrast to the (eroticised) realm of reason and ideas associated with elite men (pp. 46-47). Enlightenment empiricism changed the focus of knowledge to the realm of natural, material objects, while retaining the concept of their lowly status:

Empiricist philosophers and scientists re-present knowledge in terms of a new model which retains the nature-devaluing features of the old but which unlike the old now validates the pursuit of empirical knowledge. In this new model, knowledge of the inferior material and sensory sphere is not to be sought for its own sake, as in the rationalist model, but is strongly associated with power and manipulation. Male knowers are seen as wringing

empirical knowledge from a nature pictured as a debased and passive female slave tortured to yield up her secrets. Because this model retains so many key features of rationalism there is a case for viewing it as a 'rationalist-empiricist' tradition rather than as an independently empiricist one. In general terms, the Enlightenment transition that constitutes the empirical turn moves from a respectful model of knowledge directed towards a very restricted range of collaborating abstract subjects coded male to a disrespectful model directed towards an unrestricted range of passified (sic) objects in nature, coded female (p. 47).

In Plumwood's view, what is needed is 'an integrated democratic science that is dialogical, non-reductionist and self-reflective—a science that can bring itself and its ends under critical and democratic scrutiny' (p. 53).

Carolyn Merchant focuses centrally on the writings of Francis Bacon. In Bacon's view, as she recounts it, humanity lost its God-given 'dominion' over creation as a consequence of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, itself the result of a woman's temptation. This dominion could be found again only by digging into the mine of knowledge about nature, through the interrogation of another female: nature (conceived as female). As an illustration of the scientific methods, Bacon referred to the means used in the witch trials to extract information (Merchant, pp. 170, 168). Merchant notes Bacon's urging that nature be forced out of her natural state, subjected to pressure and shaped. She highlights Bacon's sexual imagery, anticipating the scientific language of today: praising 'hard facts', a 'penetrating mind', the 'thrust of his argument' etc. (Merchant, p. 171). From this perspective—far from any science/superstition dichotomy—

there is an intimate connection between the origin of modern science and the Bible itself. Merchant describes Bacon's priest-like scientist described in the *New Atlantis*, who appeared to pity ordinary humans (Merchant, p. 181). The scientist decided whether or not particular secrets should be revealed, engaged in experiments to increase or decrease the size of animals, to make them either more or less fruitful, to change their colour and shape. Scientists in Bacon's utopia are able to grow plants without seeds, to make new kinds of plants, and even to turn one tree or plant into another (Merchant, p. 183).

It is fairly obvious that we are looking at the mind-set which culminated in the contemporary culture of the routine manipulation of nature, including cloning and genetic engineering.

The ideology described sanctioned, in Merchant's terms, the exploitation and control of nature and, ultimately, nature's potential death (Merchant, pp. 189, 190). Referring to Heidegger, she notes that modern technology has its essence in rendering nature as a 'standing reserve', a storehouse (Merchant, p. 228). Soper points out the parallels in the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School: in its oppression of nature, 'instrumental rationality' severs us from nature as an origin (Soper, p. 30). Worth mentioning in this context also is Jeremy Rifkin's dichotomy of 'technological knowledge' versus 'empathetic knowledge.' (Cited in Fox, p. 28.)

DEEP ECOLOGY

Arne Naess (1995) endorses a 'relational' or 'total-field' perspective, rather than viewing humanity as in some way separate from its environment. If we take an expanded sense of 'self', so that we understand that care for nature is

really care for ourselves, then care is something that comes naturally, independently of ethical concerns (Naess, 1995, p. 217). However, Naess's ideas about deep ecology, predicated on human self-realisation, may be hard to reconcile with the bio-centric egalitarianism that he also endorses. The most basic problem is the disparity in terms of acting to fulfill one's own requirements on the one hand, and acting to fulfill the requirements of the biosphere (and the planet) on the other. The fundamental issue for deep ecologists like Naess is, what happens when there is a conflict between the interests of humanity on the one hand, and those of nature on the other? These kinds of issues are starkly highlighted when, for example, we have to choose between jobs for workers on the one hand, and dangerous or polluting forms of energy-production on the other.

The basic parallel between eco-feminism and deep ecology is in terms of the perceived priority of overcoming the subject/object, humanity/nature dichotomy. In Plumwood's terms, what is needed is 'a movement from a monological to a dialogical conception of the human self and its possibilities for relationship to the non-human world' (p. 195). The basic problem in respect of both positions is: how do we address the situations where the interests of the individual—in the short term at least—are not in harmony with those of the planet?

The foregoing ethical issues relating to nature are in urgent need of exploration in the area of cultural studies, particularly as they are intertwined with the emerging political/aesthetic concerns arising from recent and contemporary art and culture.ⁱ

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ⁱ This article develops some issues already explored in O'Brien (2006).