

Ilkka Halso, Theatre I from the series Museum of Nature. C-print, 100 x 154 cm @ artist.

Source: <http://www.taidelehti.fi/aineisto/2-08/halso.php>

Climate Change – an Aesthetic Crisis?

It is established that we are in the midst of an ecological crisis. I would argue that we also find ourselves in aesthetic crisis and that these two states are fundamentally related. If this is the case we need to ask how artists should respond.

Text: **Alan Boldon**

The word environment describes the thing around us or where we live. Somehow this noun suggests a separation; a thing we live in or on but are not fundamentally part of. We are estranged. Perhaps some kind of relationship counselling is required.

Naming is problematic in that distinctions can become rigid and determine relationship. Along with this one could argue that, since Descartes, our relationship to nouns and the objects they denote has allowed us to act upon our environment without concern about the damage we may cause. If an object is dead or inanimate- has no soul- then we can do what we like to it.

Performance artist **Marina Abramovic** famously asked people to act upon her with a range of objects including a rose, a feather and a loaded revolver. This objectification of herself seemed to be all that was needed for someone to feel that they could act upon her and so when the gun was pointed at her the performance had to be halted.



Marina Abramovic, Rhythm 0, 1974. There were 72 objects on the table that one can use on artist as desired, duration 6 hours, Studio Morra. Images here courtesy of Sean Kelly.

A casual and careless relationship to objects is for the main part unsatisfactory. We get bored quickly and objects are damaged and discarded. It is perhaps worth giving some attention to the retrieved or found object in art as signalling a step towards a more ecological practice.

Most artists would identify with ways of describing their work that suggests a different kind of relationship. They may talk of 'getting into my work', or 'trying to find out what the work needs or wants'.

The language used suggests an animate nature to the work, as if it has needs and desires or gives hints as to what it wants to become; what form wants to emerge. The kind of close attention and care that is required to listen to form as it emerges or to observe an artwork as it interacts with us may be seen to reconstitute soul in objects.

American psychologist **James Hillman** has said that soul is not in us but we are in soul. Maybe this shamanic journey to retrieve the soul of lost objects is as much concerned with humanity rediscovering a soulful relationship with the environment- with the stuff around us, that is inside and outside; that passes through us and that we come from and return to.

To further explore the absurdity of the way we think about environment we may try to decide at which point an apple that I take from a tree and eat stops being part of the environment and becomes part of me, or at which point a raindrop that finds its way into a glass and then my body and then out again is the environment.



Ilkka Halsio, Roller coaster from the series Museum of Nature. C-print, 100 x 134 cm @ artist.

One could also extend this argument to suggest that we have "lost touch" in many ways. The extraction industry sucking the earth dry, people gorging on cardboard food until there are obscene levels of obesity and heart disease, nature packaged up in parks and zoos whilst our cities become places of hard cold concrete, steel and mirrored glass, virtual relationships in abstract space, legislation that limits physical contact with each other, a loss of intimacy at the same time as a massive growth in the sex industry, a neurotic fear of death... all describe a breakdown or a spreading numbness; an inability to sense or feel; a dulling of the senses. An aesthetic crisis. Aesthesia: to take in the world through the senses.

Sometimes during the making process artists feel at times that they have become indistinguishable from the thing they are making. This merging and emerging out of work could also suggest how empathy and deep connection can be explored in art-making and offer suggestions as to how we can bridge the gulf between us and environment.

Systems thinking and different ways of knowing

"The great shock of twentieth-century science has been that systems cannot be understood by analysis. The properties of the parts are not intrinsic properties, but can only be understood within the context of the larger whole. Thus the relationship between the parts and the whole has been reversed. In the systems approach, the properties of the parts can be understood only from the organisation of the whole."

*Accordingly, systems thinking does not concentrate on basic building blocks but rather on principles or organisation. Systems thinking is '**contextual**', which is the opposite of analytical thinking. Analysis means taking something apart in order to understand it; systems thinking means putting it into the **context** of a larger whole."*

Fritjof Capra: Web of Life, 1996.

Arts practices that investigate context often involve collaboration with other arts practices, or with practitioners from other fields, in order to explore the qualities and complexities of place.

It is a phenomenon of both contemporary arts and other non-arts fields that growing numbers of practitioners are finding the constraints of discipline specialisation to be problematic.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration is therefore becoming ever more valuable in many spheres of contemporary research- not least when addressing the complexities of relational systems thinking.

Contextualised arts practices, theories on relational aesthetics, and **Deleuze's** and **Guattari's** influential writing on the 3 ecologies are just a few indications of some of the overlaps and common concerns now informing aspects of the arts and sciences involved in systems thinking.

In the social sciences, multi-agency research and social work have been a notable feature of late twentieth/early twenty-first century practice, and are also symptomatic of the shift in contemporary approaches to complex social, environmental, biological and economic systems.

For instance, in trying to find out why a person is destructive or anti-social it is simplistic to look only to their family background for cause. Similarly, diet, wider social economic and political context, environmental factors, peer pressure, education... may all play a more or less important part in any single action.

The relatively atomistic approach of psychoanalysis, with its obsessive focus on the family, has also been fundamentally challenged for example by the Gestalt based 'Field Theory'. This describes a porous border between a person and their environment and includes socio-political, and other ecological factors as being as vital to the health of the psyche as family or immediate social relations.

Similarly in the sciences specialised practitioners have increasingly found that divisions in fields of enquiry have become problematic and collaboration has become valuable and even necessary. This creative dissolving of disciplinary boundaries can be seen as a response to Cartesian dualities, and mechanistic approaches, revealing their inability to cope with the complexities of relational systems thinking.

We can recognise in all of this an emerging understanding that complex social, biological and economic systems are interwoven and we need to look at how we can combine different ways of knowing to appreciate this complexity.

Empathy: Close attention and deep listening

An approach to arts and ecology that I advocate involves collaboration with others who have different ways of knowing. The German philosopher **Hans Georg Gadamer** said that an encounter with otherness was an opportunity to consider the ways in which what we thought was simply true or normal is constructed and why. For this and many other reasons interdisciplinary collaboration is not easy but is tremendously valuable. It is also part of how we may closely attend to the world we live in.

On the question of whether artists should work with an explicit ecological agenda – I'm not sure. There is a risk involved in this.

When we make work with a specific intention it can be useful to have a framework that gets us moving but we often have to be careful not to stick too rigidly to this and risk missing other interesting accidents or qualities of work that are emerging.



Jeremy Deller, The Spoils of War (Memorial for an Unknown Civilian). The Fourth Plinth proposal for Trafalgar Square, London, 2008.

I am interested in the artist as researcher in collaboration with other fields of practice and practitioners. A collaborative close attention to place, any place, will reveal any level of complexity.

I don't believe it is necessary or desirable to press artists into being instrumental in providing solutions to crisis. However, I also think that any artist who is attentive and works collaboratively in engaging with place will not only research and reveal environmental crisis but will also do so in a complex, integrated and subtle fashion and the resulting work will avoid stridency and dogma but will nevertheless inform, challenge, inspire and disturb in the ways that perhaps only the arts can.

Arts and Ecology is concerned with unsettling dominant narratives, working at the edges and in the gaps, in collaboration; in feeling out the complexities of relationships. The pressure to produce measurable outcomes is familiar many of us and yet this is not the only way to ask questions about value and need. A relational, dialogic- ecological arts practice needs to explore ways to empathy. This is not something that can be measured, quantified or commodified.

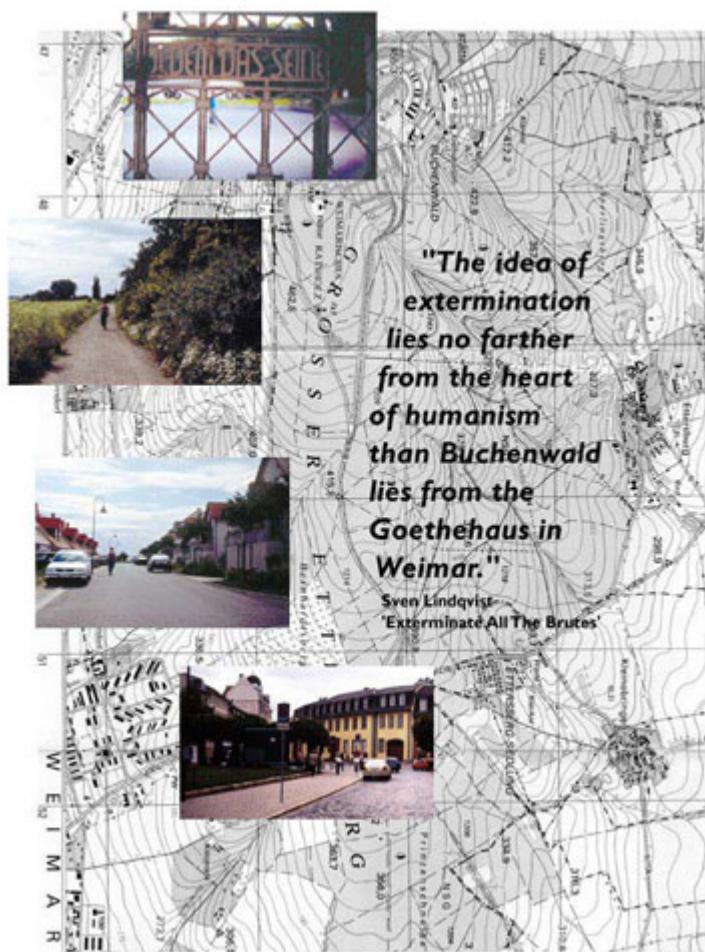
Paradoxical theory of change – slowness in a time of crisis

I am often occupied with the question of ambivalence; occupying or holding within oneself multiple and perhaps conflicting positions. To be in this state and nevertheless to find ways to act is a timeless issue but in a post-modern age we are perhaps more than ever faced with this dilemma.

At a recent Arts and Ecology symposium **Dan Gretton** of the Arts Activist group PLATFORUM said "thinking and feeling are the most important actions". Gretton is currently

working on a book called *The Desk Killer* that describes how detachment can have horrendous consequences. His book focuses on the role of the administrator in the work of the corporate machine and how efficiency is privileged above all else in the service of the great god economy.

"The Desk Killer focuses beyond the intentionality of murder and examines the more complicated, and politically urgent, question of distanced killing, of how individuals within organisations have been able to 'compartmentalise', to evade responsibility for their actions - whether in the rigid bureaucracies of the Third Reich or within the complex structures of corporations today. By foregrounding the role of 'white-collar perpetrators' in the Holocaust, and highlighting the collaboration between corporations and the state, it raises acute questions about the meaning of responsibility and the deeply problematic nature of contemporary corporate behaviour."



In August 1999, PLATFORM walked between Goethe's house in Weimar and the Buchenwald concentration camp, Germany – a distance of 10,166 steps.

Dan Gretton goes on to say:

"Many of us today inhabit a culture of overwork and stress levels have never been higher. We have the illusion of connectivity through unparalleled technological advances yet many people feel more detached than ever before. We're all travelling too fast, bombarded by

unprecedented quantities of information, besieged by a sense of barely being able to cope. That is the paradox of our world today - cut off your e-mail, ditch the mobile, unplug all devices, slow down, do nothing at all, create space for reflection - this becomes the essential pre-requisite for any serious analysis or activism."

<http://www.platformlondon.org/>

This is not a usual way to consider activism and is a remarkable call for slowness and reflection in a time of crisis. It is also one way to consider this dilemma of ambivalence.

Gestalt Psychotherapy describes how 'the paradoxical theory of change' proposes going deeply into a problem as the only way of coming out the other side. This can mean noticing, very precisely, the qualities of depression instead of trying to get rid of it. Paradoxically then, this may be the way beyond depression. The catch, according to Gestalt, is that we can't go into the thing as a strategy for getting out of trouble. We simply have to go deeper because that is the only way we can go.

Perhaps this is the same with environmental crisis. In the arts we need to go deeper into this relationship: this deeply problematic and troubled relationship we have with each other and with the environment, and not to do so to solve problems but because we need to know more deeply.

This may provide us with solutions but cannot be our motivation because we will then not see deeply enough, not feel subtly enough, not notice complexity and not move, emotionally and intellectually, with sufficient agility, grace or gently enough because we will be fixed on a problem and will see only that.

Taking care not to pathologize does not mean not caring or not being part of healing. To be concerned with ecology as an artist can mean to apply ones self to getting to know the complex relational qualities of a place without setting oneself apart from that place.



Jeremy Deller, still from The Battle of Orgreave 2001. Commissioned and produced by Artangel © the artist. See FourDocs Archive: http://www.channel4.com/fourdocs/archive/battle_of_orgreave.html

In his work *The Battle of Orgreave* Jeremy Deller revisits events from his youth that were played out in the media but also in real people's lives. Jeremy felt that there was a tremendous gulf between the version of history that the press has formed and what must have happened.

He began a research process of talking to as many people as he could who had been part of a momentous day in British history; a day of confrontation between police and striking miners, but also a day in which **Margaret Thatcher's** vision for Britain would gain momentum. Deller simply asked, what happened that day? A kind of attentive listening that led to other interviews and further meetings.

The resulting work is a deep journey into the soul of a nation. Stories maintained, by press but also by miners, police and local people, reveal the scaffolding of narratives that have served to oppress many who were involved and influence millions beyond. A strength of the work is in the quality of listening and reflection and also the honesty, eloquence and emotion that is encouraged by this attention.

The delicacy of moments when Deller asks people what happened, and what their part was, are a clear example of how a heavy handed agenda would severely limit the work and how empathetic enquiry can nevertheless produce powerful political artwork.

For me arts and ecology is, at the very least, a project to draw upon the capacities of the arts and artists- to feel out the connections and complex relationships between what may appear to be separate phenomena.

The arts do this all the time but the challenge of arts and ecology is to begin to explore the weave of social, environmental and personal ecologies. I think we need to recognise the interconnectedness of every facet of our lives and also to identify the implications of this.

James Hillman has said that statistics are unlikely to move anyone to change but that: "*The motivation must come from below the superego, from the id of desire. We must first be moved by beauty. For then love is aroused. When you love something, then you want it near, not to be harmed. What evokes love? As has been said in many places and felt by any one of us. It's beauty...*

Beauty astounds and pulls the heart's focus toward the object, out of ourselves, out of this human-centred insanity toward 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."

James Hillman: Aesthetics and Politics in *Tikkun* Nov/1996.

It is this deep connection that comes from not only seeing the thing before us but also coming to know the web of connections, be they social, mental, economic or other, that are fundamental,

In this way we come to know that **we are our environment**; this is the way to empathy and must be part of the solution to the environmental and aesthetic crisis we face.

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