

Eco-Art

Strength in Diversity

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Deepening environmental and social crises are causing more and more artists to knock down the last "no trespassing" signs of modernism, detachment, and ambiguity, in order to address issues of vital concern with a clear voice. Since some of the roots of these crises can be traced to basic Western concepts, such artists participate in the widespread critique of modernism that has been ongoing for some thirty years. Unlike these deconstructive efforts, however, the forward-looking postmodernism of much environmental and social art endeavors to construct a frame of values more conducive to a sustainable environment and to social harmony.

An example of this shift in perspective is the realization of the interconnectedness of life and the implications of this for personal and social realities. The Gaia hypothesis, for example, conceives of the planet as a single organism, with biological life, climate, and surface environment existing in a complex symbiotic relationship.¹ According to this model, damage to one part of the system can affect the whole. Further, a global system naturally respects no national boundaries, and this implies a need to think of our world more complexly, to treat it more responsibly, and to develop cooperative communities. Efforts to construct a constellation of values and attitudes in tune with our new understanding and present needs should be distinguished from the nihilism of deconstructive postmodernism. I suggest that we take a cue from philosophy and call these efforts "constructive postmodernism."²

Barriers to the recognition of our problems and the need for alternative ways of thinking are many. Fear of change, denial, vested self-interest, focus on the near and the dramatic are just a few.³ Art, with its ability to symbolize complex abstractions in concrete ways, has a unique potential for raising awareness and advancing the shift in mind-set that must occur for the sake of our survival and well-being. But we must resist the tendency to think that there is one perfect tactic, one single way to effect change. We need multiple means to reach a diverse audience. As the folksinger Pete Seeger says, when you shake a maraca, only one seed hits on the beat. What counts is the collective impact, the whole sound. Diverse art methods are needed to move a public that is plural, not singular.

I stress what seems self-evident because it is so often

forgotten, giving rise to needless squabbles among factions. Such a quarrel is the debate between art-as-object and art-as-action. While both concepts imply different attitudes about art-as-commodity, as formats for ecological messages, the choice of one over the other is a matter of objectives and trade-offs. An advantage of actions or performances, for example, is their immediacy, but this is at the expense of durability, which lends impact to art objects.

Methodologies of ecoartists may be examined not according to "medium," but according to how they affect audiences. I have made a small sampling of artists and categorized them by mode of appeal: those who alert us to environmental problems through shock or humor; those who educate us about the systemic nature of our world; and those who engage us directly, through political activism or actions. Naturally, particular examples sometimes overlap categories, but these nevertheless clarify the need for multiple means to achieve a common purpose: the restoration of ecological sanity.⁴

Among the artists who try to jolt us out of our lethargy are Richard Misrach, Billy Curmano, and Buster Simpson. They slip shocking or witty images into our consciousness before mental censors can erect the shields they so readily put up against words on a page. By touching our feelings they motivate a desire for information about problems and solutions.

The photographer and political activist Richard Misrach, fearing that aesthetic views of unspoiled nature may create the impression that no problems exist, creates "cultural landscape photographs."⁵ His power to horrify and raise questions is seen particularly in his *Roughshod over America* photographs, which belong to his ongoing Desert Cantos series, begun in 1980. Taken at bombing sites in Nevada, these document the way military testing has turned the desert into a boneyard of rusting hardware and unexploded bombs. The fragile environment is cratered like a lunar landscape. Misrach confronts us with a devastation usually hidden from public view. He speaks of a specific incidence of ecological damage, at the same time implying that this is the way we treat our planet as a whole and that there is a connection between environmental abuse and rampant militarism.

The most shocking of his recent political works is the 1987 sequence *Desert Canto VI: The Pit*, which shows dead

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livestock thrown into mass graves (*fig. 1*). The artist is not here being macabre for macabreness's sake; he explains in gallery texts that he believes the animals died as a result of contamination of the soil of their pasturage by illegal nuclear testing at Fallon, Nevada. His eight-by-ten-inch lens captures more detail than we want to see—teeth, individual hairs, wounds—making the bloated and decaying corpses of cattle, sheep, and pigs all too present. He eschews the exhilarating hues of nature-magazine photography for slightly off-key colors that imply a reality gone badly awry. With consummate skill in focus, lighting, and composition, he represents a devastated world in which we feel estranged and, when we realize that this is the result of human actions, saddened.

His recent project *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* (1990) is an ironic proposal for a national park to memorialize the abused desert land.⁶ Planned for a bombing range whose military use expires in 2001, it would be a reminder of how military, governmental, corporate, and individual practices harm the Earth. His site design employs the same method as his photographs, confronting us with unpleasant realities. In it, a “Boardwalk of the Bombs,” for

example, would lead visitors on a twenty-mile journey across a desert landscape studded with bombs, targets, craters, shrapnel, and military debris.

Billy Curmano and Buster Simpson operate outside gallery walls. They strike our funny bone, but they are deadly serious about their common concern, water pollution. Curmano draws attention to the contamination of the Mississippi River with his outrageous but heroic *Swimmin' the River*, a performance piece he has been pursuing since 1987, when he began to swim the river's entire length in stages (see p. 24). As of his 1991 summer season, he had covered nearly 900 of its 2,552 miles.⁷ Simpson's grimly humorous performances require objects as well as actions. For instance, he has placed disks made of toilet-bowl porcelain beneath sewer outfalls, so that stains on them will show the toxicity of our water. He has deposited “river Roloids”—limestone disks that gradually dissolve and “neutralize” bodies of fresh water—to highlight how acid rains affect hydraulic systems.⁸

The work of this first group of artists expresses the interconnectedness of the world by alerting us to how our actions affect our environment. A second group, which in-

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FIG. 1 Richard Misrach, *Dead Animals/1*, from the sequence *Desert Canto VI: The Pit*, 1987, Ektacolor Plus print, 40 × 50 inches, and other formats. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.



FIG. 2 Dominique Mazeaud, *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River*, performance, 1987–present.

cludes Patricia Johanson, educates by articulating the web of life more explicitly.⁹

Johanson transforms sites to make us aware that we are citizens, not masters, of the biosphere. Her landscape designs show how we can work with nature to preserve rather than destroy it. Her in-progress *Endangered Garden* for the city of San Francisco, for example, will upgrade part of a sewage system and create an ecological park friendly to native wildlife (see p. 21).¹⁰ Visitors will be able to see symbiotic relationships at work by viewing the lives of butterflies, birds, and ribbon worms. Interconnection is perceived not only empirically, but also poetically, through the means of analogy and scale inversion. Throughout the site, related patterns, such as the serpentine veining of butterfly wings and the bodies of snakes, are overlaid to show unexpected relationships. For example, the monumental scale of an image of the San Francisco garter snake, weaving on and off a pathway skirting the San Francisco Bay, inverts the usual hierarchy of human being to animal, putting us in our place as but a part of the whole, in which this endangered reptile has as much right to life as any other creature.

A third group of artists tries to engage individuals directly in political actions or healing rituals, activities less distinct than they might at first appear. Important models of this category are Helen and Newton Harrison and the late Joseph Beuys. All three bring the artist directly into the social sphere, for they refuse to confine art to a realm apart. The Newtons expose the links between institutionalized belief systems and our use of the environment by opening a dialogue about their proposals for specific urban sites. These proposals encourage local residents to begin working on environmental issues and to create change by engaging and expanding public discourse.¹¹ Beuys redefined the role of the artist according to the ancient model of the shaman. Actions and thoughts were his primary vehicles of expression and his goal was social transformation. The transformations he

sought were liberation from false preconceptions, unification of reason and intuition, creativity, and self-determination. For the shamanic artist in the Beuys tradition, society itself becomes sculpture.¹² “Social sculpture” is an apt description of a new art of direct engagement in the environmental cause.

Betsy Damon is at least as devoted to activism as to object making. Her *Keepers of the Water* project, a multimedia event, will take place in at least five Minnesota cities between 1991 and 1994. It will begin, but not end, with information about water clean-up; it will include workshops to teach citizens how to become water activists. “I want to see thousands of people working with communities to reclaim their waters, the essential sustaining element of life,” she says.¹³ Damon realizes that consciousness-raising must be followed immediately by empowerment, to be effective.

Like Beuys, Dominique Mazeaud sees no sharp separation between art and life: life is a work of art; actions intensify into rituals, and reaching out to others becomes collaboration. Her own life serves as a model for sifting out priorities and values. In 1987 she left behind the commercial art world of New York, with which she had been engaged since 1970, for Santa Fe, New Mexico. There she lives simply in a minuscule log cabin, so that she can devote herself to what she calls her art/life projects, realizations of her philosophy of being in the moment and experiencing the oneness of all life. She actualizes Beuys’s concept of the individual life as a work of art, which means living according to one’s own values, rather than those imposed by society. If life can be a work of art, individuals must take responsibility for its form and content. Moreover, it is hoped that individual change can lead to a reshaping of society.

Her art/life projects contribute to the greater ecological endeavor by adding a spiritual dimension. Her reverence for the Earth is demonstrated in her ongoing ritual *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River*, begun in 1987 (fig. 2).



FIG. 3 Vijali, *Western Gateway*, performance, 1987. Malibu, California.

This involves spending one day a month along the Santa Fe River, a tributary of the Rio Grande, collecting trash or just experiencing the river, alone or with friends. These are opportunities to live differently, if only for a day: "We never use the word 'work' when we are in the river," she points out. Besides her river ritual, which she records in her journal *Riveries*, she seeks to transform life by publishing, curating, lecturing, teaching, and performing. All these activities fit within her definition of the artist as healer and peacemaker.¹⁴ This is not to say that she sees artists as above other creative individuals; she writes about all sorts of people with her co-author, the artist Donna Henes, in their forthcoming book, *Peace Piece by Piece*. "In these times of tremendous changes," she writes elsewhere, "the language of symbols is no longer the privilege of artists. We all are being touched by this 'moment of our story.'"¹⁵

The performance artist and sculptor Vijali employs unique methods to help communities identify their problems and seek solutions. She calls her five-year project, begun in 1987, *World Wheel: Theater of the Earth*. For each of twelve sites around the globe above the thirtieth parallel, she creates elaborate pieces that respond to the thoughts and needs of the individual communities. So far, she has completed works in Malibu, California, the Seneca reservation in upstate New York, Spain, Italy, Greece, Egypt, Israel, and India. By 1992 she plans to have worked at additional sites in Tibet, Russia, China, and Japan.¹⁶ Her efforts are aimed at bringing inner harmony and a sense of community to the people with whom she lives and works while creating the event. At each location she creates site sculptures, which remain after she is gone.

To help transform attitudes and build community, she

engages local community residents in all stages of the art process. She begins by asking them three questions: What were our beginnings? What has created our imbalances? What can bring us back into harmony? From the answers grows the art event—a combination of sculpture and theatrical performance—in which her new friends collaborate or witness. For example, in the first piece, *Western Gateway*, created in Malibu in August 1987, an initial segment of the performance depicted humans, originally unified, splitting into male and female identities. The next part identified the malady that developed in American society when it decided that it knew the best way to live and used this overweening self-confidence to justify killing people in other countries. In the third stage of the narrative, Vijali appeared as Gaia personified to bring life back into balance by reuniting man with woman and both with the Earth (fig. 3).¹⁷

Vijali symbolizes this quest for wholeness—within the self, among people, between people and planet—with the circle or wheel, which is frequently used for her sculptures and which defines the itinerary of her global project. This shape is, of course, an ancient and universal sign of completeness; she studied its manifestation as a medicine wheel with the Seneca elder Yehwennode (Twyah Nitsch). Her concern is not specifically to represent Native American culture, but generally to convey the idea that “we (plants, animals, people, earth and universe) are one breathing organism.” This transpersonal vision and her insistence on individual responsibility are her ways of recalling art to its lost shamanic role of nourishing and directing the community.

This sampling of artists shows how diverse methods can alert, inform, and activate the public in environmental or other political causes. Multiple tactics suit a pluralistic public. Moreover, varied approaches may be the best way to achieve ecological sanity, for, as Joseph Beuys says, “What the system fears is manifoldness of people’s intentions and inventions against the system.”¹⁸ With this in mind, artists, and the rest of us, would do well to heed the Harrisons’ advice: “The most important thing is to begin anywhere, and get cracking.”¹⁹

Notes

1. The Gaia hypothesis was formulated by the atmospheric scientist James Lovelock and the microbiologist Lynn Margulis. There are numerous publications on this topic; for an authoritative, eminently readable introduction, see James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988). For a brief summary of the development of views of nature from the atomistic and mechanistic to the holistic, as well as their metaphysical implications, see J. Baird Callicott, in Callicott and Robert T. Ames, eds., “The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), 51–64.
2. The philosopher David Ray Griffin distinguishes between deconstructive postmodernism, which is relativistic and against any world view, and constructive postmodernism, which attempts to construct a revised world view. See his “Introduction: The Reenchantment of Science” in Griffin, ed., *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988), 16–25. I do not suggest that we adopt the specifics of Griffin’s definition of constructive postmodernism, but simply that in this general sense it is useful.
3. The need to define a new mind-set, one more consistent with the condition of the

world and our present knowledge of it, is cogently argued by Robert Ornstein and Paul Erlich; see their *New World, New Mind: Moving toward Conscious Evolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1989). For a historical model of the emergence of new paradigms, see W. Kirk MacNulty, “The Paradigm Perspective,” *Futures Research Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1989): 35–54.

4. Deborah Bright uses a political orientation to differentiate among recent works of eco-art; see “Paradise Recycled: Art, Ecology, and the End of Nature [sic],” *Afterimage* 18 (September 1990): 10–13. Suzi Gablik’s *The Reenchantment of Art* should also be consulted regarding ecoartists (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991).
5. Dan Ferrara, “Landscapes of Consequence,” *Outside* 14 (December 1989): 87.
6. See Richard and Myriam Weisang Misrach, *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West*, exh. cat. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). This proposal was the subject of a traveling exhibition, “Bravo 20: A National Park Proposal,” in 1990–91.
7. Author’s interview with Billy Curmano, February 12, 1991; Sandra Price, “The Power of the Mississippi,” *Public Art Review* 2 (Spring–Summer 1990): 14–15. Curmano takes precautions against fatigue and pollution: a crew accompanies him and he wears barrier creams or a dry suit when he swims.
8. Ned Rifkin interview with Buster Simpson in *Works: Buster Simpson*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1989), 1; Ron Glown, “Buster Simpson: An Activist Art of Urban Ecology,” *Public Art Review* 2 (Spring–Summer 1990): 16.
9. Two other artists, included in an exhibition titled “Eco-Art: Imaging a New Paradigm,” which I curated for the San Jose State University Art Gallery in spring 1991, also fit this category. For this exhibition, Alrie Middlebrook created an outdoor installation called *Urban Forest: A Demonstration Garden*. Consisting of permanently planted and temporarily boxed trees, this piece was intended to highlight the importance of trees in maintaining ecological balance. Within *Urban Forest*, Francisco Perez constructed his *Rhythms of Life*. His use of recycled and natural materials admonishes us to use Earth’s finite resources judiciously, and reminds us of the natural cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.
10. Patricia Johanson, in “From the Other Side: Public Artists on Public Art,” *Art Journal* 48 (Winter 1989): 338; idem, *Endangered Garden* (proposal), 1988, unpublished; letter from Patricia Johanson to the author, July 2, 1990.
11. Arlene Raven, “Two Lines of Sight and an Unexpected Connection: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison,” in *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 90. For an article that clearly relates the Harrisons’ contribution to ecological and social concerns, see Linda McGreevy, “Improvising the Future: The Eco-Aesthetics of Newton and Helen Harrison,” *Arts* 62 (November 1987): 68–71.
12. Carin Kuoni, comp., *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America, Writings by and Interviews with the Artist* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), passim.
13. Quoted in Dominique G. W. Mazeaud and Robert B. Caylor, *Revered Earth*, exh. cat. (Santa Fe: Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, 1990), 13. Additional information on the project is from a telephone interview with the artist, February 11, 1991.
14. Information on Dominique Mazeaud is based on conversations and letters with the artist between July 1990 and February 1991 and on Mazeaud’s unpublished “Biographical Sketch.” For sample extracts from Mazeaud’s journal, see Gablik, “Art beyond the Rectangle,” *New Art Examiner* 17 (December 1989): 20f.
15. Dominique Mazeaud, “As Many Species Disappear New Artist Species Are Being Born,” in *What Have We Got to Lose: Artists and the Environmental Crisis*, ed. Rebecca Solnit (Point Reyes Station, Calif.: Gallery Route 1, 1991), 31.
16. Since Vijali closed her Santa Barbara studio in 1975 and gave up selling work in commercial art galleries, she is not widely known. Among the published commentaries on her work are Elinor Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Time* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 364–68; Gloria Feman Orenstein, *The Reflow of the Goddess* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), 115; and Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 163–77. Additional information was obtained from the artist’s lectures, from conversations between August and October 1990, and from Vijali’s unpublished writings.
17. For a description of the first performance, see Barbara T. Smith, “Art and Ceremony,” *High Performance* 40 (1987): 57–59.
18. In Kuoni, *Energy Plan*, 51.
19. In Raven, “Two Lines of Sight,” 103. Since information about artists working on environmental problems and on the definition of new paradigms is sparse, I would appreciate hearing from artists who are doing this kind of work. Please contact me at the Department of Art and Design, San Jose State University, One Washington Square, San Jose, California 95192-0089.

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