

The Ecological Imperative

SUZI GABLIK

Other civilizations created Altamira, Stonehenge, and Borobudur; ours has produced the shopping mall, the missile silo, and the cooling tank. In the modern world, which has fostered individualism and detached autonomy as fundamental forms of self-definition, no life is sacred because we do not recognize it as such. Modern individuals do not see the Earth as a source of spiritual renewal, but as a stockpile of raw materials to be exploited and consumed. Native Americans say that for whites, every blade of grass and spring of water has a price tag on it. We are bred from birth to be consumers. As a culture, we have failed to generate a vision of the universe that is life-enhancing; and without a living cosmology enabling us to hold the sacredness of life in mind, we never establish a relationship with some larger context of meaning and purpose. Instead, we devastate the land in greed. In the late 1950s, the English writer Colin Wilson wrote that the modern artist "must become actively involved in the task of restoring a metaphysical consciousness to the age," a consciousness that looks beyond the limited, materialistic view of the cosmos promulgated by mainstream science. I propose that in today's world, the word *ecological* has replaced the word *metaphysical*, as the need for restoring awareness of our symbiotic relationship with nature becomes the most pressing spiritual and political need of our time.

"It seems frightening yet strangely appropriate that perhaps the most enduring monuments that the West will leave behind for future generations will not be Stonehenge, the Pyramids of Giza or the Cathedral of Chartres," states the photographer David Hanson, "but rather the hazardous remains of our industry and technology . . . vast gardens of ashes and poisons." "This legacy of ours," he adds, "could last for 12,500 generations. Instead of the sacred sites of Borobudur or Ajanta, we have left to future generations Rocky Flats and the Hanford Reservation. The texts of the Environmental Protection Agency are the Sutras of the late-twentieth century."

In 1984 Hanson, who lives in Providence, Rhode Island, photographed aerial views of the Minuteman missile sites—anonymous but deadly constructions hidden within the agricultural landscape of the High Plains. From 1985 to 1986, at some peril to his own health, he produced the Waste Land series, an aerial study of hazardous-waste sites throughout the United States. From approximately forty thousand of these sites, which are spread across the country, Hanson chose to photograph sixty-five, located both in indus-



FIG. 1 David T. Hanson, *Atlas Asbestos Mine, Fresno County, Colorado: October 1985* (detail), from the *Waste Land* series, 1985. Ektacolor print, 17 x 46 inches. Collection of the artist.

trial areas and in remote wilderness (fig. 1). The photographs are accompanied by maps of the sites and descriptive texts that tell the historical and social realities of these "landscapes," and the environmental and health problems they now pose. The texts also detail some of the legal strategies employed to evade financial responsibility for the contamination, and address issues of the shoddy management practices that are at the heart of the "poisoning of America." For Hanson, viewing these sites was like seeing the ravages of war. "It was very depressing," he states.

What finally happens to these deadly substances produced by the chemical industry seems not to concern the industries that produce them. This refusal to deal with their own waste, according to Thomas Berry, in *The Dream of the Earth*, is one of the most repulsive aspects of our contemporary technologies. "Our ultimate failure as humans," he writes, "is to become not a crowning glory of the earth but the instrument of its degradation."

For Hanson, Berry, and a growing number of others, what we are doing with our land and how we live on it has become a primary preoccupation. The dominator system socializes us to pursue our own ends, to dominate and prevail at the expense of others and even of the Earth. The parts function without regard for the interest of the whole. Radiating from Hanson's photographs is a sense of the self-devouring quality of the dominator model itself. Their sinister and disturbing beauty seems to negate the secret life that glimmers in them: landscape as Eros transformed into landscape as Thanatos. "The industrial age," Berry writes, "can be described as a period of technological entrancement; an altered state of consciousness, a mental fixation that alone

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FIG. 2 Othello Anderson, *Acid Rain*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 62 × 108 inches. Collection of the artist.

can explain how we came to ruin our air and water and soil and to severely damage all our basic life systems under the illusion that this was ‘progress.’ ” The confrontation between the industrial and the ecological, with survival at stake, according to Berry, is now the major issue of our time, and no prior struggle has ever been of this magnitude.

Individuality and freedom have been the great achievements of modern culture—and a kind of art that answers only to its own laws: the pure aesthetic, without a function. The entire structure of our thinking and experience in Western culture has been pervasively shaped by this assumption of separateness as the absolute foundation on which we live our lives. Today, with the future of the planet in doubt, these goals are no longer viable; we need integral awareness in every field. The environmental anguish of the Earth has entered our lives in such a way that the needs of the planet and the needs of the individual have become one. Can we really say any longer that the state of the world has no important bearing on the works of art that artists create, or that the several selves of an artist—or indeed of anyone—can be kept separate any more? Art may never save the world, but saving the world is not the same as saving the phenomenon “world” itself, which is something art *can* do: art can help us to recollect our belongingness to something precious and worthy of protection. The real issue today, as James Hillman claims, in an interview published in *Common Boundary*, is the possibility of our blowing up the world—what he calls “the heroic illusion”: stamping out things and believing only in one’s own purity. How does a culture redefine itself? How can we achieve the “world view of attachment” that Hillman

talks about, attachment to the world, continuity with the world?

Increasingly chagrined at how the Earth is being systematically destroyed, the Chicago artist Othello Anderson has abandoned making Minimal art; his priority in recent years has been to paint images of nature as vulnerable: the burning of old-growth forests and the effect of deforestation through acid rain (fig. 2). Anderson states:

Carbon and other pollutants are emitted into the air in such massive quantities that large areas of forest landscapes are dying from the effects of acid rain. Millions of tons of toxic waste are being poured into our lakes, rivers and oceans, contaminating drinking water and killing off aquatic life. Slash and burn forest-clearing and forest fires are depleting the forests world wide. Recognizing this crisis, as an artist I can no longer consider making art that is void or moral consciousness, art that carries no responsibility, art without spiritual content, art that places form above content, or art that ignores the state of the world in which it exists.

It is clear that this kind of ecological subtext for art is not (yet) in the official picture of mainstream aesthetics. It is also equally clear that many artists are beginning to realize the need for a radical reevaluation of the institutions and ideologies associated with the dominator model of culture, whose “business as usual” ideology of affluence relentlessly puts personal profit ahead of the interests of the planet. Nor is art some ancillary phenomenon. With its present subtext of power, profit, and prestige, it is heavily implicated in this ideology.

The urgencies before us are demanding that the old schismatic energy of modernism give way to a more healing energy of reconciliation. A new sensitivity is emerging at the leading edges of our culture that comprehends our interdependence and is willing to try to grow attuned to it. A few years ago, Lynne Hull, an artist who lives and works in Wyoming, began to etch small, glyphlike symbols into rock surfaces—mostly on private land in remote desert areas of Wyoming and Utah. She incised these images deeply, so that they can serve as pockets, or small trenches, to hold water or snowmelt. These “hydroglyphs,” as Hull calls them, store the desert’s most precious commodity and thus function as a water supply for desert creatures to drink. Hull writes:

I've had a long-standing interest in earth or site-specific art, but too often it seemed so egocentric . . . it did not seem enough. I felt a growing need to make a positive gesture to the earth. Couldn't there be a small-scale, nurturing, perhaps even "feminine" land art? Except in a very few instances, all man's activities are aimed at benefiting himself, as a species if not as an individual. . . . Hasn't civilization brought mankind to a point where he could take actions which would benefit primarily other species?

The hydroglyphs have become part of an ongoing project of designing “art for animals,” works that exist in the landscape in a beneficial way by making small improvements to the habitats of wildlife. Hull also became concerned with the way that eagles and other birds of prey are being electrocuted by power-transmission lines in parts of Nebraska. More than five hundred birds a year are electrocuted in this way. Her painted wooden sculptures, standing over twenty feet tall, are placed out in the landscape. They are designed to provide perches and nesting roosts for the hawks, eagles, and owls of the prairies (fig. 3). Passersby may enjoy them as sculptures, while the birds have a safer roosting place. More recently, Hull has been making floating-island sculptures, with platforms for nesting waterfowl, and she has been experimenting with winter dens and brushpiles for small mammals to hide in. All her designs are made with the help of wildlife biologist and zoologists. “I love the idea of making art that helps wildlife,” she says.

If modernism developed around the notion of radical autonomy and individual uniqueness, the politics of a connective aesthetics is very different. It understands that the spirit, or “binding power” that holds everything together, is what is lacking in the underlying picture we have of our world, in how our particular culture transmits itself. As we move toward an environment of limits, a new cultural imperative is being argued and fought. “Today,” writes Charlene Spretnak in *Reweaving the World*, “we work for ecopeace, ecojustice, ecoeconomics, ecopolitics, ecoeducation, eco-philosophy, ecotheology, and for the evolution of ecofeminism.” To redefine the self as relational, rather than as separate and self-contained, could actually bring about a

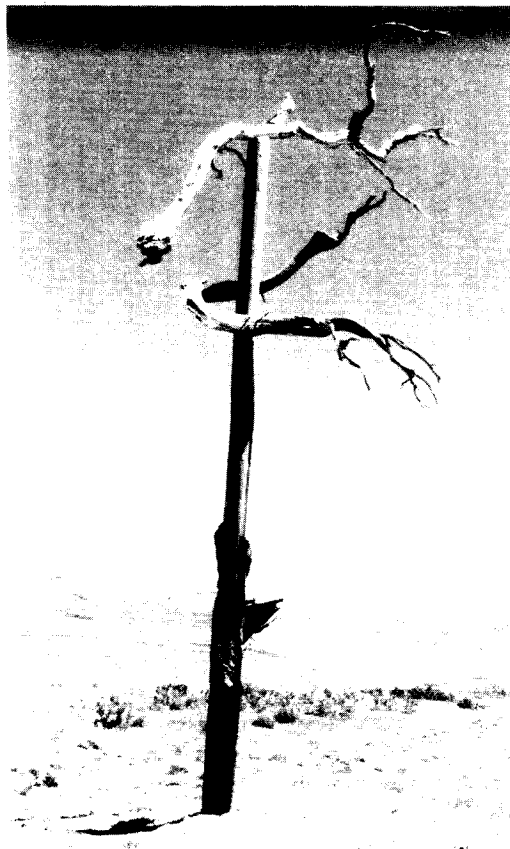


FIG. 3 Lynne Hull, *Raptor Roost SB1: Wind*, 1990, wood and found materials, 20 feet tall. Located along Highway 487 at the Shirley Basin Rest Area, between Medicine Bow and Caspar, Wyoming.

new stage in our social and cultural evolution. The self that sees beyond merely personal existence to intersubjective coexistence and community is the ecological self, opened up to our radical relatedness. To recognize and respect the “other” has not been part of the myth of self-creation, which must be executed in the “tough freedom” of separation, not connection, not intimacy with the world.

Faced as we now are with the diminishing richness and vitality of life on Earth, the historical mission of our times, as Berry claims, is to achieve a new cultural coding for the ecological age—a new, more integral language of being and value that can overcome the devastating consequences of the existing mode of cultural coding. Creating an art that is integral with this new coding may well be the next phase of our aesthetic tradition. In the past we have made much of the idea of art as a mirror (reflecting the times); we have had art as a hammer (social protest); we have had art as furniture (something nice to hang on the walls); and we have had art as an inner search for the self. There is another kind of art, however, that speaks to the power of connectedness and establishes bonds, art that calls us into relationship. Perhaps, as Hillman says, the new aesthetics will not be found in museums or beautiful objects, but in some visible manifestations of “the soul’s desperate concerns.”

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