

The greening of art: ecology, community and the public domain

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Environmental degradation, pollution and poverty are said to be destroying most countries worldwide. This article responds to the need for the recognition of role that ecologically-concerned art can play in environmental education. However, political and economic agendas are at odds with these concerns and are at the core of much contemporary ecological art that questions humankind's relationship to the land. The processes of critique in these artworks engender the idea of "a future" and artists are redefining their role as socio-political activism, collaborating with communities and environmentalists to effect change. Ecological artworks represent an interdisciplinary approach, are based on the concepts of collaboration and biodiversity, place an even greater emphasis on natural processes and time sequences, provide these creative activists with new ways to synthesise art, science, nature and life, and sensitise the viewer to the fragility of nature. The article is based on the premise that art is imaginative, visionary and multi-dimensional thus able to provide creative programmes, that are educative, create environmental awareness and promote a paradigm shift that incorporates concepts of interconnectedness between people and the planet, and that of *living lightly* on the planet.

Keywords: ecological art, environmental education, land degradation, paradigm shift, water pollution

Die vernietiging van die meeste lande oor die hele wêreld word aan die agteruitgang besoedeling en verarming van die omgewing toegeskryf. Hierdie artikel het ten doel om aan te toon dat kuns wat ekologies-betrokke is 'n rol kan speel in ekologiese onderrig. Politieke en ekonomiese agendas is egter in stryd met ekologiese melange wat aanleiding daartoe gee dat die mensdom se verhouding met die land in heelwat kontemporere kuns bevraagteken word. Die kritiese proses in sodanige kunswerke sinspeel op die idee van "n toekoms" en kunstenaars herbenoem tulle rol as sosiaal-politieke aktivisme, samewerking met gemeenskappe en omgewingsdeskundiges ten einde 'n verandering teweeg te bring. Ekologiese kunswerke wat 'n interdisciplinêre benadering verteenwoordig, is gebaseer op samewerking en biodiversiteit en plans die klem sterk op natuurlike protease en tydsiklusse. Dit voorsien kreatiewe aktiviste met nuwe maniere waarop kuns wetenskap, die natuur en lewe saamgebind kan word en verskerp die waarnemer se sensitiwiteit ten opsigte van die broosheid van die natuur. Hierdie artikel is gebaseer op die premisse dat kuns verbeeldingryk en visionêr is, asook multidisiplinêr, dit bied dus die geleentheid om programme op te stel wat opvoedkundig is en omgewingsbewustheid behou, asook om 'n paradigma-verskuiwing teweeg te bring wat konsepte met betrekking tot die verband tussen mense en die planeet insluit en bowenal dat ons lig op die planeet moet lewe.

Sleutelwoorde: ekologiese kuns, omgewingsopvoeding, omgewingsbesoedeling, paradigma-verskuiwing, waterbesoedeling

It is a generally accepted notion¹ that art reflects the times and the socio-political conditions of the era in which it was made. American environmental artist, Alan Sonfist states: "Art has always reflected the questioning of a society by itself and often takes an active role in the search for the answer to those questions" (1983:xi). Baile Oakes in *Sculpting with the land*, demonstrates how the visual language of art can expand our dialogue and understanding of our relationship within the living systems of our planet. He states,

We presently find ourselves so removed from a perception of our place in the natural order of the world that we view humanity and technology as entities separate from the Earth and its other life forms. [He focuses on humankind's interrelationship with Nature and] the unmanageable conflict between those espousing human centered (sic) values and those who emphasize the need to preserve the life supporting systems of the planet (1995:1).²

This is certainly true of early Land Art in a time of conflict juxtaposed against idealism, where the Cold War, the Vietnam War, nuclear threats and civil unrest were seen against space exploration and technological developments. Land Art, as a movement in its infancy in the 1960s, is said to have encompassed diverse aspects such as a rejection of the commodification and commercialism³ of the arts as well as a return to nature after the industrial revolution. These land works dealt with issues of dematerialisation of the art object, materiality of the earth, temporality, natural phenomena, and an experience of place and identity with the land that

spoke of continuity, life, death, renewal and ritual. In its use of natural cyclical processes, Land Art can be seen as one history that has led to present environmental and ecologically-concerned art. Alternative histories could be seen as that of Happenings and Feminism also prominent in the 1960s. The latter's pro-active philosophy was concerned with not only women's rights but also human injustices including the land while Happenings was a movement that sought active audience participant in both the process and space/context of the artwork. Artist and critic, Suzanne Lacy underlines these statements. Speaking of art in the public interest to which environmental and ecological art can be seen as belonging, she states that "various vanguard groups, such as feminists, ethnic, Marxist and media artists ... have a common interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audiences, relevance for community, and collaborative methodology" (1995: 25) including their concerns embedded in equality, human rights, and the land.

This paper sets out to demonstrate the relevance of contemporary ecological art in its endeavour to address present environmental ills. In this, it fulfils the notion that art reflects the times and conditions in which it is made. Ecological art is a sign of our times, a sign of global depredation and pollution, and a sign of a world searching for reconciliation with nature. Although there is a definite shift in world-views toward sustainability and a synergy with nature, in many instances, political and economic agendas are still at odds with these concerns⁴. However, environmental journalist, James Clark comments that there

is reason for optimism. There is an unmistakable global trend toward what is needed most – an *attitudinal* change by the world's middle class and their leaders regarding their planet. Environmental groups are becoming stronger, and their protests more focused and effective. Economic necessity, pressure from young adults, television documentaries, better-focused school curricula, eco-disasters and the costly oil wars are encouraging new thinking and new values (2002: 19).

Lucy Lippard's contention is that "the reestablishment [sic] of a coherent relationship between nature and culture is a critical element in any progressive view of the future" (1983: 12)⁵. However, author Richard Girling, not doubting Lippard's opinion but dubious about the occurrence of this interconnectedness, states that economics stand in the way of environmental sustainability. He says, "Environmentalism does not sit easily with market theory ..." (2007: 42). This undercurrent, power in governance⁶, is at the core of much contemporary art in the land that questions humankind's relationship to the land. Activist art speaks about both social and environmental depravation: poverty, abuse, water shortage and pollution, and the scarring of the land such as deforestation, desertification and urban sprawl, to name a few. The focus in pro-active art is on social change through processes of critique that engender the idea of "a future". While restoring natural and urban sites, socially-concerned artists are redefining their role as socio-political activism, collaborating with communities and environmentalists to effect change and offer alternative unique approaches to land renewal that provide new ways to synthesise art, science, nature and life.

Artists are in a unique position to effect ... environmental changes because they can synthesize new ideas and communicate connections between many disciplines. They are pioneering a holistic approach to problem solving that transcends the narrow limits of specialization. Since art embodies freedom of thought, spirit, and expression, its creative potential is limitless. Art changes the way people look at reality. In its most positive mode, art can offer alternative visions (Matilsky 1992:3).

Barbara Matilsky (1992), author of *Fragile Ecologies*, believes that an understanding of ecology is essential for the survival of the planet. She states that art, ritual and myth developed as a need to secure a sacred connection to the earth and that the emergence of environmental art has re-established this vital link to nature, in which degraded lands are "undergoing remediation and reclamation by artists ... [and] are conceived as public spaces where people can develop a closer relationship with nature" (1992: 4).

This article also argues for *intervention through the arts* and creative pro-active collaborative programmes that can become significant factors in addressing social issues and environmental concerns, and in changing the paradigm or world-view of society⁷. Ecological artworks often represent a more socially-oriented approach, are based on the concept of biodiversity, place an even greater emphasis on natural processes and time sequences, sensitise the viewer to the fragility of nature, and address environmental destruction and pollution created by contemporary society. Being within the public domain, these rehabilitated sites highlight both the causes of the contamination, pollution or desolation as well as the aesthetic reform in the hope that these contradictions will shift attitudes and promote a new social consciousness. In addition, the intention of such work is on *place-making* and the construction of recreational *sites of sociation*.

By the early 1970s, Land Art was playing an influential role in land reclamation in which art mediated between environmental understanding and the need for natural resources⁸. However, artists were concerned about complicity and the possible cover up of exploitive practices as well as the dissipation of corporate responsibility⁹. Robert Smithson, one of the earliest protagonists of land art and reclamation projects, believed that these artworks could create a dialogue between environmental issues and the value of aesthetic solutions in relation to industrial land devastation (Hobbs 1981). Smithson's philosophy behind these interventions could be said to “emphasize the changes, establishing and maintaining a dialectic between industrial ravages and bucolic reclamation, acting as a fulcrum to keep in suspension the two opposing states” (Hobbs 1981: 219).



Figure 1
Parc de la Creueta del Coll,
Barcelona, Spain. 1994. View from the
the quarry (Photo: W Ross).



Figure 2
Eduardo Chillida, In Praise of Water,
1987. Parc de la Creueta del Coll, Barcelona, top of
Spain (Photo: W Ross).

Many quarries, a result of strip mining, have undergone reclamation. These projects underline the above intention, particularly with regard to land formation and the scale of intrusion resulting from these mining activities. The most obvious signs of mining exploitations are dump heaps and terracing structures. The Eden Project¹⁰ in Cornwall, south west England and Parc de la Creueta del Coll¹¹ in Barcelona, are the result of such reclamation projects. Both the old Creueta del Coll stone quarry and the extensive abandoned china clay pit Bodelva, the site of the Eden Project, have been transformed into popular places of sociation through elaborative interdisciplinary collaborations. The fundamental financial, structural and practical principles in both projects were to take full advantage of the sites' original exploitation and resultant formations. By enhancing the particularities of each site, the underlying industrial

processes become the focal point and the resultant economic benefits provided by these land formations.

The old stone quarry in Barcelona offered a unique space with an astounding hollow gouged from solid rock. This in itself provided a discourse between aesthetic value and destructive processes. The striking contradiction between order and chaos confronts you as, without warning, you suddenly enter the site at what was the floor of the quarry with the rock walls rising high above you. On first seeing the quarry, sculptor Eduardo Chillida was captivated by the site as a “living space” and as an ideal location for his sculpture *In Praise of Water* (figures 1 & 2) based on the myth of Narcissus. The rock face sets an imposing backdrop for, while also framing this enormous constructed mass floating in mid-air as if held up by some invisible force. A slight but perceptible movement in the form adds to the sculpture’s vitality and dynamic presence that seems to defy gravity. The shadow accentuates this movement as the light reflects off movement in water below. The artwork creates a tension between structure and site, giving focus to the space. Decisions concerning the rehabilitation of the quarry were influenced by the potential and character of the site itself: the terracing and especially the rawness, that is to say, the brutality of the mining processes presented what could be considered “wildness”; and over time a variety of plant life will spread across areas of this rock face. What was an abandoned site is now a place not only of recreation but with an unexpected spectacle that has the ability to evoke a sense of awe in our desire for and romance of wild places while nevertheless being a reminder of society’s determination to dominate the planet. What is more surprising is this astonishing site exists alongside the density of nondescript urban dwellings.



Figure 3
Bodelva, the disused china clay
pit near St Austell, Cornwall, England
(Photo: W Ross, of the information poster at Eden).



Figure 4
The Eden Project, near St Austell,
Cornwall, England (Photo: W Ross, of the
information poster at Eden).

Bodelva, (figure 3) one of the many disused sprawling clay pits that scar the east Cornwall landscape, provided an ideal location for the Eden Project (figure 4) as the largest conservatory in the world so that plants, “even the humble potato”, could tell their stories that could fire the imagination. What evolved was “a living theatre of plants and people” (Smit 2001: back cover). The final result was multi-dimensional and regenerative: by exploring the synergy between people, recreation, gardens, the arts and environmental education, the project focuses on the interdependence between people and the planet. One experiences art as central to the intention, particularly as a mode of environmental education for both young and old, through storytelling, festivals, sculptural and technological installations, relevant exhibitions and various participatory

arts and crafts events. Developing areas of indigenous growth from various parts of the world, looking at crops that feed the world, investigating plants that provide necessary products from fuel to fibres to medicinal uses, visitors are made aware of their dependence on plant life.



Figure 5

Eden artists team: The water tank, (details). This art exhibit deals with the availability of water, water resources and water conservation across the world (Photo: W Ross).

As you explore the gardens at the Eden Project, you become aware of the richness of plants, their individual uniqueness of structure and colour, and their function within the universe as nourishment for humans and animals, as energy and industrial sources, and as pleasure. To ensure conservation of the natural world, the philosophical approach throughout Eden is one that is positive rather than the usual disapproval of people destroying the planet. Using the arts, visitors are given a totally new perspective on the value of and our reliance on plants. The Eden Foundation states that its activities “marry horticulture, architecture, art and creativity, science and technology” (Elsworthy in Petty 2007: 8). Their international educational project involves collaborations around the world growing gardens and food crops while also ensuring literacy and education in deprived communities¹². The Eden Project is developing sustainable environmental educational sites of regeneration that reach across continents. Besides giving Eden its structural character of terracing, a large sterile clay pit is now an extensive flourishing *garden of rebirth*, a contemporary garden of Eden.

An enterprise such as the Eden project brings to the fore the importance for synergy between its visitors and its contents, between people and plants, and makes this affiliation a reality. As you criss-cross the pathways through the terraced cultivated gardens, this connection is presented by the many information boards and banners that provide historical contexts for the trade in tea, coffee, spices, sisal, maize, to name some of the products on which people have become reliant. Many sculptural seats, creative installations and artworks visually consolidate this association of synergy. In addition, in the *Core*, the educational hub of Eden, artists have created an array of intricate mechanical and technological artworks that visually manifest the multitude of products on which the human race relies. No one can leave the site without a better understanding of the need for a new approach to the planet, a new holistic paradigm or world-view toward a symbiotic relationship with the Earth.

Landfills and the resultant degradation of surrounding areas have become important sites of art interventions across the world¹³. *Turnaround/Surround* (figure 6) originally a clay quarry and brickyard, is a reclaimed 50-acre landfill site on the outskirts of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Together with the Council, artist Merle Laderman Ukeles established an extensive collaborative process that resulted in the development of a large multi-use public park incorporating various amenities and an active community participatory programme. Ukeles sees landfills as social sculptures and her intention in such sites is to address the interface between humans and nature (Matilsky 1992: 79). Fundamental to the acceptance of these reclamation projects were several community programmes in which the construction of a mound was pivotal. The artist

conceptualised the childhood game of *King of the castle* around this outlook point. Treasures (personal items of memorabilia) donated by local residents were embedded in the hill while two sculptural thrones and *The Galaxy* dance floor (figure 6) with its yellow and blue design based on a stellar constellation, cap the mound. To enhance the sense of grandeur, a sparkling carpet of glassphalt¹⁴, developed as part of a crushed-glass recycling project, leads up to the site. A final two-month long community engagement programme, planned by the artist as a “hand-over ritual”, will represent the cultural mix of the residents in the area.



Figure 6
Merle Laderman Ukeles, *Turnaround/surround*, 1989 - ongoing.
Rehabilitation of a landfill site, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. The *Galaxy* dance floor is in the foreground with the wetland area at the lower edge of the park (Photo: W Ross).



Figure 7
Merle Laderman Ukeles, *Turnaround/surround*, 1989 - ongoing.
Wetlands, situated around the boundary of the park, filter and purify polluted water seepage from the landfill (Photo: W Ross).

The final aspect of the construction and rehabilitation process involved the division of the site into specific use-areas: shady protected treed areas, wild sites with tall indigenous grasses, intimate rose and herb gardens, open play areas and quiet recreational spaces as well as sports fields and an athletic track. Essential to the site, related to problems of seepage and gases escaping from reclaimed landfills, was the wetland system (figure 7) that filters these gases and purifies the water run-off. The park is extensive, well kept, with an openness in its planning that enhances the sense of tranquillity. This once degraded landfill has been turned around, is a local asset owned by the residents, and has become a popular recreational space.

It is important to understand that land-based art interventions are concerned with not only the final format of the work but more specifically with processes, the interface between people and process: that of intervention, collaboration and environmental awareness. The underlying objective is not to make art but to employ the arts in rehabilitation processes focusing on ecology and in drawing attention to the causes of environmental *ills* resulting from societal ignorance and indifference as well as political and economic agendas. Consequently, in the last few decades, environmental artists have been even more involved with ecologically-based concerns, with nature as a living system, cycles of plantings and growth, and in remediation. The philosophy underpinning these artworks is that of continuity and the symbiotic relationship between the natural world and the human race. By employing Nature's processes, artists present new art forms, focusing the audience on "an aesthetic of interconnectedness, social responsibility and ecological attunement" (Gablik 1993: 22).¹⁵ Vegetation, growth, fertility and decay are seen as metaphors for life, death, rebirth and the continuity of living systems, themes that equate with human conditions. In these art-making processes, spaces are turned into particularised in places in which the viewer is provided with an opportunity to relate to and interact with nature and its natural forces.

One could ask how artworks could ever change perceptions or alter world-views. Art is usually understood to be paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints or other traditional media. Works that are a little off-beat may be accepted but the general population is not familiar with contemporary modes of art-making. Normally, the more we see things, the less we notice, irrespective of the content. However, when anything is different, surprising, curious, unique or extraordinary, it is usually given attention. So when soil, seeds, plants, moisture and water, warmth, light and sun, cycles and systems, time, space, air and oxygen become sculptural media, people are curious if somewhat sceptical. Taken further into works such as in Chicago's *Culture in Action Exhibition*, the arts action group *HaHa* set up the artwork *Flood: a volunteer network for active participation in healthcare* by creating a hydroponic vegetable garden in a storefront space on Greenleaf Street as both a physical and metaphorical association with AIDS. In this way vegetables could be grown without contamination thus providing maximum nourishment. The site also provided a gathering and educational space. "Using art in the guise of hydroponics as a vehicle for education and dialogue – about AIDS, about safe sex, about being an AIDS volunteer, about social responsibility and caregiving – provided a nonthreatening (sic) way to get people to talk about these issues" (in Jacob 1995: 90). For this same exhibition, Mark Dion developed a three-part wildlife conservation project¹⁶ with a group of high school students by setting up an on-site studio and public information centre in Lincoln Park for their arts action programme. The tasks incorporated a rainforest study programme, an expedition to Belize, and the formation of an urban ecology action group. In such projects the ordinary person becomes a collaborator within the art-making process with the intention of creating awareness or of presenting social and environmental concerns. The interface between the making process and the audience, *participation* becomes the artwork and the knowledge transferred or gained

becomes the success of the work. Information/education is given a different, possibly an even more accessible, format. These artworks also subtly and maybe subliminally, make reference to issues of social and environmental “ills”, global warming and the destruction of the planet. As an increasing number of artists are creating social and ecologically-based artworks, these are being more readily acknowledged and subsequently, are changing attitudes and creating a gradual paradigm shift. This is evidenced in the increase and acceptance of such work as discussed in this article.

Ecological artist, Patricia Johanson states,

It would seem that the time has come for the creation of a vast new public landscape By interweaving man’s construct with the profuse phenomena of nature – water, geological formations, plants and animals in their natural habitats – it might be possible to shift away from a world oriented to power and profit, to a world oriented to life (from an unpublished manuscript quoted in Matilsky 1992: 40).

Water pollution, in particular, has given rise to many collaborative art interventions¹⁷. Johanson’s innovative art, ecology and urban renewal programmes involve creative interventions that revitalise and rehabilitate natural ecosystems while also providing public access to these fragile environments. At Candlestick Cove, San Francisco Bay, the artist built a site-specific artwork, *Endangered Garden* (figure 9), over a pump station and holding tank for excess water and sewage that normally flows into the Bay during heavy rains. Johanson designed this artwork as a series of habitats connected by the serpentine bay-walkway that celebrates the now endangered San Francisco garter snake. Candlestick Cove is a fragile wetland environment and the artwork provides the public with greater access to a system of mounds, plantings, wetlands areas and lagoon life on the edge of the Bay. Based on structures inherent to the shoreline habitats, *Ribbon worm tidal steps* (figure 10) creates a sustainable complex inter-tidal ecosystem. Through the reclamation of various natural systems, the area becomes a time-based ecological artwork constantly changing with the ebb and flow of the tides.

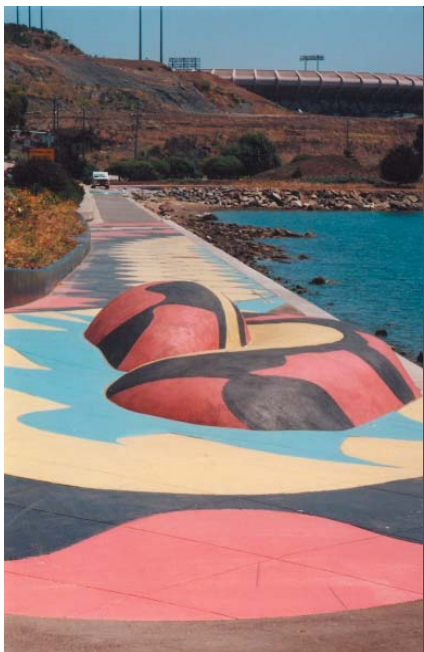


Figure 9
Patricia Johanson, *Endangered Garden*, 1988 - 1996. Rehabilitation of Candlestick Cove Shoreline and the surrounding area, San Francisco Bay, USA (Photo: W Ross).



Figure 10
Patricia Johanson, *Ribbon worm tidal steps* – a complex inter-tidal ecosystem (Photo: W Ross).

Speaking of environmental art today, Malcolm Miles states:

Environmental art today has four main aspects: art which reclaims polluted or damaged land; art which draws attention to threats to habitat and diversity of species; art which works practically to heal the land of pollution; and art which foresees alternative futures (in Kemp et al 1999: 122).



Figures 11 & 12

Nine Mile Run Greenway Project, 1997-2000. Studio for Creative Inquiry, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, USA. Left: view from the top of the slag heap (Photo: W Ross).

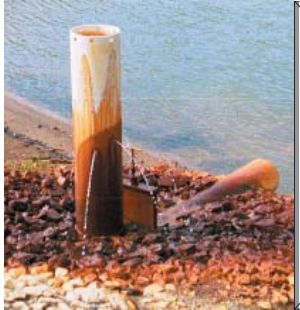
The *Nine Mile Run Greenway Project* (NMR-GP), was one such collaborative programme. Artists worked with communities and professionals from many disciplines on an extensive on-site research programme to explore possible solutions to the degradation of the 230-acre wasteland used from 1922 to 1970s as a steel mining slag heap (figure11). What had been a “wooded valley of special beauty” with a river running through, was now almost completely obliterated leaving a stream (figure12) that trickles through what has become a narrow cutting that occasionally opens into small areas of valley. The artists set up a trailer on-site as a studio, office, information centre, working laboratory and exhibition space, enabling anyone to link with and participate at any stage of the working processes.

The aim of the research team was not to *cover up* the degradation but to contrast and reveal the legacy of industry and economic development against the ecological processes at work. Their aims were to find alternative creative solutions to retaining and upgrading the remaining areas of woodland, to rehabilitate the stream and find sustainable solutions for the slag heaps, one being a housing development. The effectiveness of the project was rooted in its results: the capacity and knowledge gained, the understanding of the interrelationship of linked environmental, social and economical problems explored through a multi-dimensional interdisciplinary educative process using art and technology. Working together, the group of artists, scientists, council members and community participants developed

a socially acceptable solution that was also economical, aesthetically rich and ecologically sound. ... they created an integrated ecosystem restoration indicative of nature’s complex goals. ... [they] realised that slag heaps offer more biodiversity than typical lawns or city parks! ... NMR-GP-related activities eventually altered everybody’s cultural, aesthetic, economic and ecological values (Spaid 2002: 62).

Not far from Pittsburgh, a similar situation of acid mine seepage is occurring. The Vintondale AMD (acid mine drainage) & ART PARK rehabilitation scheme was established with the stated aims of transforming environmental liabilities into community assets. This interdisciplinary initiative re-creating *place*, consists of a series of six AMD Treatment Ponds (figure13) and wetlands as a water purification system into which the polluted acidic metal-laden water seeping from the coal dumps, drains and deposits its pollutants as it passes through each successive pond, eventually filtering clean water into the final expanses of water which are being established as *History Wetlands*. Industrial machinery and rubble left on site will

be used to create artworks that will reference the history of the site. What was a derelict site gains aesthetic and functional value through the construction of artworks, walking and cycling pathways, recreational areas and sports fields, and in the recognition of a new place of sociation. More importantly though, is the on-going collaborative processes through which the community needs are met, long-term sustainable solutions are achieved, water pollution is addressed, and environmental education takes place.



Figures 13 and 14
Vintondale AMD & ART Park, Vintondale, Pennsylvania, USA 2002
on-going. Rehabilitation project of acid mine seepage into watershed area. Image showing iron oxide deposits on the stones (Photo: W Ross).



Figure 15
Seen & Unseen: 1995-1997.
Quaking Houses Wetland - a collaborative community project for the rehabilitation of the Stanley Burn, County Durham, north east England (Photo: W Ross).



Figure 16a
Polluted water in the Stanley Burn (Photo Source: Kemp et al 1999).

Similarly, *Seen & Unseen* (figures 15 & 16), near Durham, north east England, was another wetland solution to mine dump seepage and was an alignment between people and place that resulted in an ongoing environmental arts and science programme uniting communities and professionals from various institutions. North east England has suffered much environmental and social degradation due to the closures of coal mines and the decline in the shipping industry. Determination by local communities to improve the environment, and in this instance, to regenerate and rehabilitate the local waterway, the Stanley Burn and its surrounding natural habitats, resulted in this collaborative pro-active intervention. Quaking Houses village appears to be located in a rural setting but beneath the surface the unseen legacy of the mining industry continues to degrade the area as pollutants unrelentingly seep into and poison this small local stream (figures 16a and b).

One could ask what *art* has to do with water pollution and why? Art is about the imagination, it can bring a visionary approach to an ordinary task. In this instance, it brought a rich and diverse quality to the collaborative process and became integral to the construction of a full-scale wetland that provided social, cultural and environmental benefits. Community participation fulfilled one very important aspect, that of making the unseen, seen. The more people involved in the process, the more visible the problems became. Creating awareness of the merits of long-term viability of biodiversity within the ecosystem, was of paramount importance to the process. The brief for the appointment of the artist was that innovative and creative approaches, appropriate to a wetland context, be incorporated in the collaborative process.

Art in this project went beyond the typical tenets of early land art of defining and articulating space. The site of *Seen & Unseen* was considered as a socio-political site, an experience of process and a questioning of people's connectedness to the planet. The *Boardwalk* (figure 15) offers an experience of place in several ways. Glass panels in the walkway provided direct views of the polluted/clean water as it entered/exited the wetland; set into the boardwalk posts, was the unique and innovative multimedia installation, *The Listening Posts* using new technologies to foster communications and present the collaborations that had taken place; while the living willow sculptures built in the wetland itself, reminded one of the living systems and processes continuously taking place on site. Unfortunately, the glass panels were replaced and the audio artwork relocated in the Library because of lack of maintenance, the grasses and vegetation have overgrown the wetland, and the boardwalk will eventually rot. No maintenance system was established.

In Lewes, south east England, artist Chris Drury has created wetland system based on the heart, both being systems that filter and purify the "life-blood" that flows through their hosts, nature and the human/animal body. The wetland is situated on the edge of the town within the Nature Reserve. Local people and school children were fully involved in both the community arts and educational programmes initiated by Drury and supported by the local Council. On visiting this site I was a little disappointed by a sense of neglect in the area. It has to be said that many of the early public land and environmental artworks suffer from a certain lack of maintenance with funding having not taken this into account. As a relatively new mode of practice, there are still problems to be addressed, one being that of maintenance. However, in instances where communities have been involved, this has often resulted in ownership and maintenance by these participants, especially schools and "friends" organisations. These occurrences shape attitudes and change perceptions toward the need for "keepers of the earth". Nevertheless, attention needs to be given to budgeting structures to ensure sustainability and maintenance after completion.

Water, pollution, reclamation, education and community participation have been central issues in this presentation research. In South Africa, we are aware of the serious threats to coastlines, marine environments and inland water systems including catchment/watershed areas, rivers and estuaries. It has been stated that the Country has only enough water until 2030, yet our wetlands, swamps and marshes, crucial to the water situation in South Africa as sponges that soak up, store, filter and slowly release rain water into our rivers, are slowly being eroded and destroyed or taken over by agriculture.

Besides the concern for water pollution, attention must also be drawn to mangrove swamps (figures 17 and 18) and estuarine areas as being irreplaceable ecosystems, essential as nurseries for various freshwater and marine species. Unfortunately, worldwide *the general public* seems unconcerned about such issues: people are too busy, too rich, too poor or too indifferent. If we

are to make any significant difference in this and other similar countries, we need to initiate awareness campaigns that become part of our everyday lives in our homes, at play and in our public spaces. I am unaware of any artists in South Africa presently conducting environmental research or creating ecologically-based arts interventions¹⁸.



Figure 16b
Durban Bay Head Mangrove
swamps: pollution into the Bay by the
tides (Photo: W Ross).



Figure 17
Beechwood mangrove
swamps: pollution washed down into
the Umgeni River Mouth (Photo:
W Ross).

These international examples set important precedents for presenting a pro-active role in environmental remediation and community education in South Africa. Without slavishly following international trends, the uniqueness of the African landscape combined with a concern for land degradation and water pollution, offers many opportunities for particularised art interventions that address environmental remediation. There is certainly no lack of polluted or degraded areas: abandoned quarries exist nation-wide, water pollution is rife, and plastic covers the land like a blanket. Art in history reveals that creative people have always played a role in the development of a society. Given a public context from which to operate, creative expression gave voice to political, spiritual, historical and social concerns of every culture. Alternative interdisciplinary creative interventions that are collaborative can assist in changing attitudes through participation, thereby encouraging a paradigm shift to a state of mindfulness where we *walk lightly on this planet*.

Initially, art in the land dealt with the articulation of space, and later, with environmental concerns. However, it could be said that in the present political climate, land devastation is a result of socio-political and economic agendas that underlie environmental exploitation. Alternative ecological actions need to address these agendas. “Today’s eco-artists go ... beyond the aims of land art, being concerned more to reclaim than reconstruct landscape. ... In the face of corporate greed and the power games of states, artists seek ... to sustain rather than destroy life on earth” (Miles in Kemp et al 1999: 121). Community action has power and art has the potential to shape the consciousness of the people. Combined, this creative action could be defined as artistic citizenship. The artist sits at the edge of society and, wittingly or unwittingly, becomes the conscience of the people.

Notes

1. Artists, art critics and authors writing on art hold this notion on the basis that artists have always been in tune with both their physical and social contents while also being concerned with philosophical issues such as social conditions and injustices. (Lacy 1996: 19 – 20; Oakes 1995: 1; Popper 1975: 12) Capra, Gablik, Lippard, and McHarg are other authors that concur with this notion.
2. These views are held by many authors including Lippard, Sonfist, Capra and McHarg.
3. This is true in regard to physically working in the land; however, they did not really reject the Gallery system as these land artists still exhibited the results of these works in galleries thus disseminating these works.
4. Suzi Gablik states that we believe that “we must maximise growth and economic development at whatever cost, even if we devour this land and the Earth’s resources as we go – a process we ...identify as ‘progress’”. She pleads for a paradigm shift that will halt the destruction of our world and that in the work of many artists today, “we are beginning to see the emergence of a new clarity and firmness of intention concerning the environment.” ... She believes that many artists address the critical issues of a more coherent relationship between people and the natural world and that it means “exploding the humanist notion of the autonomous individual as the solitary center [sic] of all meaning, and replacing it with a sense of human dependence on a stable climate, fertile soil, living rivers and forests, and a sustainable biosphere” (in Oakes 1995:3). Journalist Fred Pearce in his publication, *When the rivers run dry: what happens when our water runs out?* looks at the situation of clean accessible water and the condition of rivers world-wide. He speaks of what economists call ‘virtual water’, the water used involved in growing crops and manufacture of products that are then traded globally. He says, “Whatever the virtues of the global trade in virtual water, the practice lies at the heart of the most intractable hydrological crisis on the planet” (2006: 23,25). He further comments throughout the book that governments and officials deplete, sometimes completely, the capacity of rivers for agriculture at the expense of the life of and communities reliant on these rivers.
5. Gablik states that the “essence of the new paradigm emerging in physics, general systems theory and ecological changes our whole idea of reality with the notion of interconnectedness – an understanding of the organic and unified character of the universe”. She states that this shift in thinking is apparent in present Reconstructivist ideas in which there is a “transition from Eurocentric, patriarchal thinking and the ‘dominator’ model of culture toward an aesthetic of interconnectedness, social responsibility and ecological attunement” (1993: 22).
6. Throughout the publication, *Sea Change: Britain’s coastal catastrophe*, author Richard Girling examines policies and attitudes by both the USA and UK government policies toward climate change and the results of global warming (2007: 42). Additionally, Clark states, “There is an enormous amount of corporate selfishness and unmitigated greed in the world The overkill syndrome [of humanity] has had profound effects on the story of humankind, on natural history and on the planetary environment. ... Overkill has played such a central role in the history of humankind’s handling of our environmental capital that it must be viewed as a force of considerable ecological significance. It may be argued that overkill is synonymous with greed. It certainly seems to affect industrialists. ... industry ... in its often pitiless pursuit of wealth has revealed a poor sense of moral obligation regarding the environment”(2002: v, 5, 6). Gablik, McHarg and Oakes share these views.
7. Gablik speaks extensively about the need for a new world-view in which we “live lightly on the earth” (1993 & 1995). See Endnote 3: S Gablik. Capra says the “profound change in our world view, from a mechanistic conception ... to a holistic and ecological view, [is] a view which I have found to be similar to the views of mystics of all ages and traditions” (1984: xvii). The concern for conservation of the earth and its natural resources has become a major world-wide issue. In the Introduction to *Landscape and conservation*, Brian Hackett says that “there is a growing interest in conserving landscape, sometimes as a strict preservation process and sometimes in an acceptable modified form to meet the current economic and social changes” (1980: no pagination). Environmentalist, Ian McHarg states that “we need, not only a better view of man and nature, but a working method by which the least of us can ensure that the product of his work is not more despoliation”(1971: 5). Tim Beatly, associate professor in environmental planning, and consultant Kristy Manning, in their publication *Ecology of place* expresses concern for the destruction of the planet that

- “stems from competing visions of the future ... witnessing the continuing decline in the bonds of community and the quality of our living conditions”. However, they state that “there is an alternative vision, one that imagines a different future. ... places ... where there is a feeling of community, an active civic life, and a concern for social justice. ... At the same time this alternative vision explicably connects human settlement patterns to ecological conditions” (1997: 1-2).
8. The paper looks at several specific sites of rehabilitation related to mining and water pollution although it is acknowledged that the causes of ecological deprivation are both corporate and social, private and public.
 9. Discussion regarding a balance between the extraction of natural resources and a concern for the environment by Robert Morris and other artists at the symposium *Earthworks: land reclamation as sculpture* (King County Arts Commission 1979: 7).
 10. The Eden Project was established as an educational trust creating a unique garden of plants from across the world to explore human dependence on the natural world and as an educational centre dealing with art, ecology and best practices for principles of sustainable living.
 11. Parc de la Creueta del Coll was the result of the rehabilitation of the old abandoned stone quarry, Creueta del Coll.
 12. The Eden Project has committed itself to various programmes around the world such as *Garden for life* and growing food crops. It has established several exchange programmes in various countries in rainforest conservation, with Green Futures College in South Africa, the EARTH University, Costa Rica, and Architects Without Borders.
 13. Merle Laderman Ukeles, Patricia Johanson, Nancy Holt and other artists have been commissioned for the reclamation of landfill sites in the USA, UK and China, to name a few countries.
 14. Ukeles undertook a research project with an industrial consultant to develop a new product “glassphalt” made from various raw materials and glass, for the pathways and athletic track a part of an extensive glass-recycling project.
 15. Gablik also believes that the “remapping [sic] of the modernist paradigm, happening now throughout our entire culture, requires alterations in the framework and context in which we do our work. For many artists, this meaning has nothing less than a total reassessment of the meaning and purpose of art” (in Oakes 1995: 4).
 16. Mark Dion “felt it was an opportunity to explore the often unacknowledged relationship of art and science which [he] felt was a fundamental, ‘natural’ and useful alliance. ... I have witnessed the need for creative visual input, as I have also experienced the productive value science can inspire in artistic endeavors” (in Jacobs 1995: 107).
 17. The nature of this paper does not allow for an extensive discussion of the many artists involved in collaborative programmes dealing with water pollution such as: Betsy Damon and her initiative *Keepers of the Water*; Dominique Mazeaud’s *The Great Cleaning of the Rio Grand*; Viet Ngo’s *Devils Lake Lemma*; Joseph Beuys’ *Bog Action*; and the Harrison’s *Breathing Space for the River Sava*, to name a few.
 18. This is a new area of research for me and I am presently preparing to initiate several collaborative ecologically art-based wetland and mangrove swamps projects.

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