

# The use-value of “nature”: projection and estrangement or dialogue and mediation?

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Notions of nature have been vital for the visual arts since the advent of Romanticism. However the stability of “nature” as a concept has changed dramatically. A range of autopoietic theories in the work of writers such as Bruno Latour offers a useful pathway through the developing concept of a nature that is always mediated, no longer autonomous. The paper discusses the works of several artists who engage with the complex emotional and conceptual consequences of this situation. Artists James Searle, Ali Bramwell and Sally J. Morgan, and film-maker Werner Herzog in different ways re-think the nature/culture continuum. Their work can be seen in terms of cultural theory and offers the opportunity to think differently about the work that artists do in the world. The article was first presented as a paper at the Dawn Light Symposium in Ourimbah, New South Wales in 2006 in the context of public art projects around this topic.

**Key words:** nature and the visual arts

A version of what follows was presented as a discussion paper at the Symposium Dawn Light held at the Ourimbah Campus of the University of Newcastle, Australia, in September 2005.<sup>1</sup> During this period Hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans and the increase in such hurricanes was being attributed to increased climatic turbulence because of global warming. The context was a forum of practicing artists, who engage actively with issues that are of concern to the wider community. The forum’s objectives were as stated below:

The event will focus on cultural values regarding “nature” in different cultures and the ways in which societal change and historical depth play out in the formulation of options for the future.

A central consideration will be the idea of nature as a changing cultural construct in an increasingly global contemporary art environment.

Beginning from the position that nature defaults to culture, one of the objectives of Dawn Light will be to examine the philosophical underpinnings that inform poetic expressions of contemporary cultural form in different societies.

In my paper I showed the work of James Searle, a Dunedin, New Zealand, artist who was working in ways that critiqued the division of labour between nature and culture.

The idea of “nature” is a forceful one for the visual arts. The concept of nature arrived for Western European society at its full strength at about the same time that the notion of art as an expressive force did: with Romanticism in the eighteenth century in Europe. Nature was peeled off from culture as subject matter for the visual and literary arts, in resistance to industrialisation and increasing urbanisation.

Two centuries later, post-structuralist analyses of the problems inherent in any binary division of concepts occurred at the same time as the realisation that vegetable life is fragile, as are the ecologies that support it. Currently nature is misbehaving, — in New Orleans and Galveston, Bangladesh and anywhere estuarine: its misbehaviour is the result of industrialised culture’s love for oil and our refusal to consider that we can and have altered the climatic status quo that used to be called natural because it was believed to be autonomous.

Much visual art is dedicated to the representation of nature as landscape. The increasing divide between the academic art world and that of the common consumer of the artwork is perhaps best seen in the academic artworld’s exhaustion with the genre of the landscape and the public’s continued demand for it. I would argue that the demand remains because landscape art today is a vehicle for the human sense of loss and a resistance to the changes that are occurring on the planet.



**Figures 1 and 2**  
**Ali Bramwell, 2005, *Lotusfield*, installation, Gosford, New South Wales, Australia.**  
**(Images provide by the artist.)**

But many artists, themselves not immune from these feelings of grief, regard the landscape form as already too implicated in the division of agency between nature and culture that has prevented human greed from ceasing to destroy the planet as habitat. Theorists of the landscape such as W. J. T. Mitchell argue that the creation of the form implied a sense of control, symbolically and pragmatically manifested through the science of perspective, which facilitated colonisation and the transformation of habitat to grassland pasture or pine forest.<sup>2</sup>

At the symposium artists came together to make work in an urbanised lakefront environment, a gallery with an enclosed, Japanese garden and a field with swamp bush around it. In this

environment naturally occurring objects such as animals, plants and landscapes were frequently represented deliberately as non-natural objects. The Korean dancer Shin Young-gu worked with a wind-up bird, New Zealand sculptor John Lyall threw a stuffed snow leopard into the swampy harbour, while Ali Bramwell made lotus flowers out of car inner tubes which floated in a mangrove swamp regularly cleansed of such debris. She also hung the introduced, decorative plant gardenia upside down within metal matrices.<sup>3</sup> I heard someone of an Asian background refer to “the nature” visible in the tightly manicured Japanese garden and realised that beneath what might have been a different use of the English article lay a significantly different notion of nature: a nature that was not respected as something which should be left to its own devices, but was instead raw material for cultural behaviour; not an agent but a product and a process. The Western artists appeared reluctant to alter anything which could be conceived of as autonomous, instead using representations. Or, as with Ali Bramwell’s upside-down and therefore dead trees, they emphasised the destruction implicit in such engagements with plant life.

In *The Politics of Nature*, Bruno Latour argues that the nature/culture divide is a false one, and reflects a western, dichotomised thought system that is essentially anthropomorphic, that is, constructed according to theories around human consciousness.<sup>4</sup> In a pragmatic glossary, Bruno Latour suggests that there are three elements of ‘nature’: the “cold and hard” nature of the primary elements – inorganic; the ‘warm and green’ nature of naturpolitik; and the ‘red and bloody’ nature of political economics; which means among other things the proliferation and eradication that occurs in the dialectic of conservation.<sup>5</sup>

He states that the term nature leads to “an unjustified process of unification of public life and of distribution of the capacities of speech and representation in such a way as to make political assembly and the convening of the collective in a Republic impossible”.<sup>6</sup> “Latour argues that Western Europeans see themselves as the human element in a hierarchy in which all that is non-human has no voice, that is, representation. He agrees that the idea of nature is a social construction, but argues more radically that it does not pre-exist its creation as a construct and that it remains a construct which impedes any solution of our ecological situation.

Before giving my talk, I had a heated debate with friends about the relationship between culture and nature. After navigating the question of how far the word culture could be extended – as far as any human activity, including breathing, I argued, thinking of the ways that bodies are mediated by cultural behaviours such as exercise patterns, only as far as “art”, in all its forms, the response came – the debate came down to a discussion around the use of the word mediated. How “mediated” is a landscape, or a body? If mediated, how could they be autonomous? The discussion was not about definitions but the values attached to them. Mediation was human and therefore contaminated. However, it seems no longer possible to draw a line anywhere. For instance, if our use of carbon has heated the seas and contributed to the increased fervour of hurricanes, which are in turn heading for one quarter of the world’s production of oil, how can this utterly interdependent situation be dissolved into a binary division between nature and culture?

During the symposium, an artist had placed a pyramid of eggs – many dozens – in a bush area. He had wanted white eggs but could only find only brown ones, so they had all been painted. By the next morning, all had disappeared. Who had taken them? The culprits appeared to be a group of foxes. Foxes are feral and destructive of natural habitat in Australia, but the German cook at the restaurant was feeding them because for him they were a pleasing sign of wildlife, which is by definition something to be conserved. One of the people with whom I had been discussing mediation was involved in the eradication programme for these same foxes.



**Figure 3**  
**James Searlea, 2005, installation, Dunedin, New Zealand.**  
(Image provided by the artist.)

In my presentation I showed a long video sequence of James Searles' construction and deconstruction of large quantities of recycled construction material. In what follows I discuss only the intersection that occurred in his work between a rethinking of the foundations of representation in sculpture and his experience in conservation. His engagement with the thought of Bruno Latour forms one of the foundations of this paper. At the time he was looking after the albatross on the colony on Otago Harbour; a colony which is fenced, policed and nurtured.



**Figure 4**  
**Jim Searle, 2005, *Peripatus*, installation, Dunedin, New Zealand.**  
(Image provided by the artist.)

One of his previous jobs had been to manage conservation reed beds in East Anglia. This involved cutting swathes of reeds so that lines of sight enabled visitors to see the wild life in what appeared to be unmediated activity. Thinking through the eyes of art history he recognised that this practice was closely related to the work of the first British landscape architects. A pre-determined visual field provided a template for the gardener: the template created a balance between visibility and concealment for the birds, which moved in and out of view in predictable ways. Of course the British landscape has been the subject of agriculture for millennia, and cannot be considered “natural” in a southern hemisphere sense; it is definitely mediated. Coming south to a more recently developed country, Searle discovered to his horror that the act of conservation required an enormous amount of killing: ferrets, stoats, weasels, hedgehogs, possums, cats, dogs. Many of these introduced species were animals he had hitherto worked to support.

This was one of the underlying contexts for his studio work. He was considering what constitutes a landscape; that is, a representation, and how one might operate within representation as opposed to outside of it. Searle found useful Bruno Latour’s discussion of the Brazilian rainforest where human mediation was part of what had initially appeared to him to be a self-sustaining and autonomous landscape. Searle began to work with detritus: leaves, plastic bags, rejected sawn timber, collating it into various forms. A certain literalness suggested that getting into the space might work and this was helped by the art institution’s reaction to the height of his “rubbish pile”, which became the subject of much careful negotiation with Occupational Health and Safety issues. His edifices, which had begun to look like detritus-piled versions of various images of the genre of the sublime (shipwrecks, situations of danger and decay) were reduced to a level pile. Instead of responding to the various forms that his objects suggested by organising them according to a visual aesthetic principle or gestalt, he decided to create walkways through the detritus. He also attached a video camera to his forehead and crawled through it, naming the piece *Peripatus*, after a very rare many-legged caterpillar that is found in a minute urban lung in the city he was in.

This work is from the point of view of the observer: Searle is being *peripatus*, crawling around the undergrowth. It’s a very grey, scratchy kind of situation; classically inorganic. This in fact is the dialogue that has been created here. Does that make it a dystopic vision of the kind of inorganic nature that is produced by human intervention? Is it a post-apocalyptic vision, as one observer suggested? If this work is a mimicry of natural processes it places the human as the protagonist, the central creator who shifts stuff around, and occasionally freezes it as a given vantage point suggests coherence. This is a picture of the problematic hierarchy of the divided nature/culture entity we live in. It considers also, as does much of Searle’s work, the organic/inorganic interface, as materials were in different states of “growth”: for instance, wood, paper and cardboard were juxtaposed, as different states of the same material.

Searle also considered Latour and Michael Serres’ discussion of relations of adjacency and analogy. They argue that the human actor is separate from the “natural” order but creates in a similar fashion: makes, acts, intervenes. In an installation at the Blue Oyster Gallery in Dunedin, New Zealand, Searle acted at the opening as if the site was another conservation exercise: he moved through the space as if impervious to any social interactions, opening and closing vistas.<sup>7</sup> The viewers became “natural” objects which were framed by the creation of paths which revealed their habits. In this inherent inversion of the relationship between the natural and cultural, Searle recognised that in this process representation entailed estrangement. At the opening, the conservator was intense, anxious and detached from the community, as he sought to capture their natural habits for a proposed viewer.

A more marginal art situation, but one which exemplifies the problematic of a desire to approach and represent nature, is *Grizzly Man*, the film by Werner Herzog of the documentary

film-maker Timothy Treadwell's relationship with a group of grizzly bears.<sup>8</sup> Over a period of years Treadwell spends his summers with a group of grizzly bears who tolerate him, and appear to have located him within their pecking order, but one summer he stays behind after they leave. A group of bears who are too old and weak to move to winter pastures take over the space and as the food supply dwindles Treadwell and his partner become more evidently a food source. They are killed, probably by a bear Treadwell has filmed searching for food and watching him. Treadwell speaks of the danger he is in but appears to seek it. He has, for reasons which are an extension of the relatively familiar and rational love of "wildlife", attempted to merge with the community of bears but can in the end become bear only by the simplest form of ingestion. Ironically, it seems that grizzly bears are not social animals. The fox that he befriends is, and enjoys his company, but this is not enough. Treadwell has chosen instead an animal that lacks the basic quality of the human: the desire to communicate and empathise with others. In Latour's terms, he has chosen a distinctly non-human object for his affections, and has subordinated himself to that object's only use for him.

An artwork dealing with the complexities of projection and estrangement with regard to nature was the recent performance by Welsh/New Zealand performance artist Sally J. Morgan who over a period of five hours laid a large number of rolled up grass turfs throughout a gallery space.<sup>9</sup> The rolls were carried as if they were sleeping mats below a pack. They were shifted to places where tea-urns and teacups established a notion of the British colonial pasture. New Zealand was once all forest and within a terrifyingly short time was made into British pasture of a type which for the British does constitute "nature". A Welsh tale, recited by the artist as she lay on one of the rolled out turves, told of the Green Isles of the Ocean, which were visible only from a certain patch of grass in a Welsh graveyard. One enterprising navigator, wishing to reach these isles, took a slab of this turf with him on his boat so he could see these isles; but even when he reached them, the artist told us, he could only see them if he was standing on "his own home". A feature of the work was claustrophobic quality, with steam, water, tea and damp earth, and the tired woman moving them around for five hours until the area was carpeted with engagement with the conflicted relationship that is now the only one possible with "the nature". Too close to be autonomous or distant, a mother who needs looking after: something now as much to be feared for its incompetence as loved for its now always fragile qualities.

Artists are mediators by definition, working between concept and material, object and subject. They have no need to declare the truth value of what they make. However, what they make has agency, does produce effects, and in that sense cultural productions are "real". Perhaps because of the increasing integration of artist and art education into the tertiary academic system, the roles that artists take on for themselves have proliferated. Many artists now see themselves as significant performers in the transformation of cultural experience. Also, as visual culture has extended its reach, artists find themselves in many industries to which they bring a creativity that may not be defined as art by others but is by them and their funding bodies.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly the case where artists have been trained in institutions which have educated them through the appropriation of cultural theory and theories of "public" art.<sup>11</sup>

So the kind of thinking artists engage in is increasingly the kind of thinking that works in the world: the creation of possible futures, speculations, illusions and material objects that extend human experience. Art and cultural studies increasingly merge, explicitly where artists acknowledge the implicated nature of their activities; implicitly where the idea of a divide between art and life retains its strength but the work of artists reflects the values of the society. Because communication is inherently dialogic or binary; and further that binary relations are established both with the addressees- the parties in the communication- and the objects spoken about – a subject/object divide seems almost impossible to avoid. Nature is subject-matter, but

artists increasingly wish to demonstrate the imbricated character of the relationship through an insertion of their practice into its systems or a resistance to the sentiments associated with our projection of grief onto the landscape.

As a tool for understanding and working with this situation, cultural theory has most particularly offered artists ideas such as autopoiesis, cybernetics and theories of the cyborg, that is, theories which describe the ways that values, material objects and cultural systems are seen to work together. Latour's re-thinking of the politics of nature is one such theory, and it argues for the need for dialogue rather than hierarchy between the two distinctly different entities that form this world, the human and the non-human.

Such theories privilege a systemic autonomy over consciousness, and argue that the world we live in is constructed of various self-generating systems which are constructed of parts that in relationship become something else and cannot be reproduced by any separate element.<sup>12</sup> While this privileging appears to diminish one of art's chief values for society, its particularly human character, these theories describe the complex functioning of artworks and works of visual culture very well, remove the notion that the artist is in some ways isolated from society, and work with the conflicts that the idea of nature has for the visual arts.

## Notes and references

- 1 Dawn Light was held in Gosford, New South Wales, Australia, in September 2005. The organising committee was Neil Berecrys-Brown, Juliet Fowler-Smith, Tim Braham. Visiting advisors were Park, Byoung-Uk, (Korea) and Ali Bramwell (New Zealand), Lee-Ji Eon, (Korea). The events were held in and around the Gosford Art Gallery and in the Ourimbah campus of the University of Newcastle.
- 2 The field of discussion was established by W. J. T. Mitchell, 1980, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- 3 [http://www.springsteelchicken.co.nz/2005thumb\\_lotusfeild.htm](http://www.springsteelchicken.co.nz/2005thumb_lotusfeild.htm) has images of Lotusfield.
- 4 Bruno Latour, 2004, *The Politics of Nature*, Cambridge Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.
- 5 Latour, op. cit. p. 244
- 6 Latour, op. cit. p. 144
- 7 Jim Searle, Blue Oyster Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2005.
- 8 [www.wernerherzog.com/main/de/html/news/GRIZZLY\\_\\_MAN.htm](http://www.wernerherzog.com/main/de/html/news/GRIZZLY__MAN.htm) includes images and a discussion of this film
- 9 Sally J. Morgan, Episode 2: Points of Perspective, in 'Performance Series' The Blue Oyster Gallery, curated by Charlotte Dick with the Dunedin Fringe Festival, October 2006. Sally J. Morgan is Pro-Vice Chancellor at Massey University in Wellington New Zealand.
- 10 Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2001.
- 11 For a useful discussion of such work see Finkelpearl, op. cit.
- 12 For a brief but useful account of the sequence from Maturana and Varela's discussion of autopoiesis with regard to living entities and their insertion into this theory of non-living forms and technologies see <http://www.christianhubert.com/hypertext/Autopoiesis.html>.