

The following is an excerpt from a longer paper written by Beth Carruthers as an introduction to the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project. The full text of the paper is available at: www.bethcarruthers.com

Art, Place and the Meaning of Home

Preface

In this essay there are terms that have multiple meanings. Before beginning, I will define these terms as I use them in this paper.

“Ecology” denotes the relationships between plants, animals (including humans) and their surroundings. I use this term ‘ecology’, as well as “ecosystem community,” to mean an intertwined and interdependent web of relationships of which everything in the world including human cultures are a part.

I use “environment” to denote the world that encompasses us.

In the context of my essay the term “culture” conforms best to meanings given in Anthropology 2, i.e. denoting and embracing human traditions, ideologies, civilizations, and their beliefs and practices.

“Nature”³ is a commonly used term. In this essay it is not used to mean the same thing as “environment” or “ecology”. Briefly, Nature is the primary term in Western culture and traditions for what is other than human or human-made.

In this essay I will refer to “Nature” and to “Nature-culture” or “human-Nature”. Such references include attitudes arising from “Cartesian dualism”⁴. (Since complex explanations of some terms would be too long for this introduction, please see the endnotes for additional information.)

Many use the terms Environmental Art and Ecological Art interchangeably but I do not, because not all Environmental Art conforms to the core principles that define Ecological Art.⁵ “Ecological Art, or EcoART, is not simply art about, or in, the environment, but is work that addresses the well-being of ecosystems, the impacts humans have within ecosystems, the kind of relationships we have with the places where we dwell, and the other species with whom we share these places.”⁶ While the relationship of human to the world is implied in many art works, I know of no other genre of art that specifically embraces this ethical position and places it at the centre of the practice.

Introduction

This essay considers the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project (SPEA) within the context of Ecological Art (EcoART). My interest is primarily in what these works reveal about the relationship between human cultural practices and the world around us. As I consider the works in Stanley Park and the premise of the project itself, I will argue that art, and

specifically ecological art, can and does contain the possibility for helping change the Nature-culture relationship for the better. The artworks do this by revealing that humans and human cultures do belong within an ecosystem community. Such a revelation may prove invaluable, since if we are a part of an ecology, and not outside observing and acting upon a Nature that is alien to us, then how we act or behave within this ecology or ecosystem can be understood to have an immediate and significant impact (just as our behaviours and choices do within a family or any other kind of relationship.)

For most people art has nothing to do with ecology, or our relationship with environment. The idea that the arts might be important to the Nature-culture relationship in any real or significant way seems especially difficult to apprehend. Contemporary art often comments on, observes, exposes and reconfigures aspects of human culture, but for the vast majority of people ecology seems to have little to do with culture and less to do with art.

Yet ecology, or environment, is where we live, where all life lives – it is where cultures live, where the arts and all human endeavours live, since culture also cannot be outside the world.

Essay

When the winter storms of 2006 significantly altered the familiar landscape of Stanley Park, the Vancouver Parks Board made some brave choices. First they decided to do a formal assessment of the park as an urban forest, an ecosystem – which is by definition an intertwined and interdependent community. The other important choice was to initiate the creation of a series of environmental art works in Stanley Park.

While Stanley Park is no stranger to radical change, the changes brought about by these storms seemed especially significant to the public at large. This significance arose in part from a love of the park, from recent awareness of climate change, and from a growing sense of being part of a much greater ecological community. But the most significant thing, in terms of our better understanding of our relationship with place and world, may be that these changes came about through agency outside the human, and at a time when the world seems unstable in ways that feel new to us. These changes were not intended by planners or the city, nor agreed to by the residents of Vancouver. Since we were clearly not in control of these changes they were readily seen as some kind of disaster, or devastation.

Yet while we may not be in control, we are part of an environment of storms, of causes and effects, and of creative responses. Looked at through an alternate lens, the storms and their effects could be recognised as a shout for attention in an ongoing conversation we forgot we were having, and as an opportunity for responses within that conversation. These responses must be creative and imaginative, since the ways we have approached ecological systems and environment in the past have been terribly limited and not that successful. We may be forgiven for a certain collective confusion as to how to respond to 'Nature'. We have been taught to think and believe certain things, and these ideas and beliefs are called into question by events of great magnitude. In trying to see our way and move through these unusual events we must recognize that though we need the sciences, we absolutely need artists and the arts as well.

Art can help us to see familiar places in new ways. In the Stanley Park artworks there is an ongoing collaboration within the works. The dialogue between place, materials and artist is more transparent than we are used to seeing, since the park ecosystem is a dynamic participant in the creation and ongoing evolution of the works. The artworks have been created from materials, many of which are from within the park ecology, and the materials as components of the place itself are handled and re-imagined in new configurations. In these new configurations these materials reveal aspects of the park and its stories which may previously have been hidden by their very familiarity.

From the beginning the design of the project—of developing an ephemeral piece and then a semi-permanent one—has been about listening. It has been about attention to the place that we call Stanley Park. The process has also been one of collaboration, since the place as an active living forest is as intrinsic to these works as is any act of the artists. These works highlight this relationship and the intertwining of culture and environment. When we experience these works as we walk in the forest, the place is revealed to us in ways that we may not have otherwise noticed. The sensuous and intricate tangle of roots highlighted by Tania Willard in her piece *Birth* resonates in our own bodies as the network of roots mirrors our own circulatory systems, viscera and neural pathways. The nutrients that nurture the body of the tree are the same as nurture our own body. The connection is clear and generates an understanding of this relationship through complex engagement on multiple levels.



Birth by Tania Willard
photo by Paul Colangelo

John Hemsworth's and Peter von Tiesenhausen's ephemeral work *Cedar* appeared as the bared bones of an ancient tree. *Cedar* speaks of the need to heal or complete a missing section of a giant cedar, and of this absence as the stripped boughs curved like an empty rib cage bridging the gap in the fallen tree. In this work there is a sense of loss and the desire to heal what has been damaged, as well as tenderness and care. Approaching the semi-permanent work by the same artists, *Listen*, we are enveloped in the scent of cedar, which clings long after we leave the site. We carry the trace of the ancient tree with us, out of the forest and into the city. At the same location as the earlier work, *Listen* also completes the missing section of the tree while responding to the absence underlined by the earlier

ephemeral work. This time it is not bare bones and absence we find – it is mystery and completion. The large sphere, blackened by fire, draws us in. Peering through cracks in the form we see a golden ball of cedar at its heart, holding the promise of new life as does a seed. The fallen cedar and the sculpture will together return to the forest to feed new growth. Pay attention. Listen. This is also who and what we are.



Cedar by J.Hemsworth & P. von Tiesenhausen
Photos by Paul Colangelo



Listen by J.Hemsworth & P. von Tiesenhausen

The collaborative works of Davide Pan and T'Uy'Tanat Cease Wyss range from the subtle to the substantial. A delicate interweaving of branches echoes both the tangle of rainforest brush and the weaving of baskets practiced by Coast Salish women. The names for indigenous plants are carved on a tree stump in both Coast Salish (the language of local pre-colonial human culture) and in English (the language of the dominant settler culture). Huckleberry has been planted within a tree stump, a new life nurtured by the body of the old tree. Who can tell whether the wind, a bird, or a human hand aided in this process? These works speak of regeneration. They speak of language and of knowledge of place. They speak of being a part of the land in its regeneration. The sense is clear that people, the land, the waters, the plants, are not separate from the one another, but are mutually reliant in an ecosystem community.



Xapayay'/Cedar by Davide Pan and T'Uy'Tanat Cease Wyss
photo by Paul Colangelo



Shirley Wiebe's two ephemeral pieces *Hibernators* and *Fringe* and her semi-permanent piece *Cozy* reveal place as culture and environment intertwined. Working from recent history of the park, *Hibernators* – soft sculptures created from BioNet and woodchips from the park restoration – repopulate the derelict bear pit in the old zoo area. Amorphous in shape, they have a peculiar presence – ghostly reminders of the spectacle of a non-human Nature caged and controlled, represented by the bear who lived and died in confinement here. Unlike the bear, the *Hibernators* do not return our gaze. The bear pit, overgrown with trees and vines, is itself a relic, a ghost of its former self, returning to the forest.



Hibernators by Shirley Wiebe; photos by Paul Colangelo

All of the works in the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project will change over time through the effects of climate, insects, bacteria, fungi and creatures, both four-legged and two-legged. These changes in the artworks will highlight the creative and collaborative nature of the entire ecosystem community, for as the artists step away, we are all able to watch as environmental forces transform their art. The pieces hold within them the communion between the artists and the environment. They embody this relationship. The works remind us that ecology, like art, is a creative process.⁷ The artworks serve as ambassadors for an enlightened human relationship with the environment



Xapayay'/Cedar (detail) October 2008
by Davide Pan and T'Uy'Tanat Cease Wyss; photos by Paul Colangelo



Xapayay'/Cedar (detail) November 2009

The Stanley Park Environmental Art Project does much more than observe or comment on the nature-culture relationship, it acknowledges and engages with it, commenting on and seeking alternative configurations for that relationship. Knowing that we are a part of this relationship, that we belong to it – absolutely belong – brings home the responsibilities of relationship. It also brings us home.

Beth Carruthers

NOTES

¹ As defined in the Oxford Dictionary

² For example, Sir Edward Tylor writes on the first page of his 1897 book: “Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (quote sourced at Wikipedia)

Tylor, Edward. 1920 [1871]. *Primitive Culture*. New York: J.P. Putnam’s Sons

³ “Nature” is a term most often conflated with “environment”, although non-human animals, for example, may be Nature, while not being environment. Nature is often thought of as what we humans act upon, something outside ourselves, yet we ourselves have “natures”. Nature is perceived as somehow pure, unsullied – as in “natural foods”, “natural goodness”, or as an original state before humans tampered with that state. Nature is also seen as dangerous, ungovernable, wild and capricious. Some examples of Nature in this case would be storms, earthquakes, or wild animals. One does not have to go to great lengths to see that the relationship we have with Nature – both as a Nature whose meaning and being is defined by ourselves, and a Nature that is mysterious, ungovernable and not-us – is complex and conflicted. This is indicative of what is known as the “Nature-culture divide”.

¹ “Rene Descartes argued that the mind and body are distinct and separate. This is the first point of Cartesian Dualism. According to Cartesian thought, man looks upon his world as a direct reflection of him, his values, beliefs, experiences, conditions and development. “

(Source: What is Cartesian Dualism: Mind and Body as Distinct and Separate | Suite101.com

http://philosophy.suite101.com/article.cfm/the_concept_of_dualism_in_cartesian_dualism#ixzz0ZW65NWPm)

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In other words, in Cartesian thought humans are defined as human through mind and the ability to think, and the world is a projection of our minds. It exists for us according to what we project upon it. In this scenario the world outside the human mind does not exist in and for itself, but is only what we humans, through our thinking, create it as. If culture is a product of human intellect and mind, and humans are defined by mind, separate from the world or an external Nature, then not only is there a human-nature divide, but also a culture-nature divide.

⁵ See one definition created by long-time practitioners at the *International EcoArt Network's* website: <http://www.ecoartnetwork.org/aboutus.htm>; and more on terms here at *GreenMuseum*: http://greenmuseum.org/what_is_ea.php

⁶ Carruthers, Beth (2006) Definition created for *Art As Ecology*©

⁷ Paraphrased from Haley, David (2008) "The Limits of Sustainability: the art of ecology" in Kagan, S. and Kirchberg, V. eds. *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures*, p. 147

Some Resource Links

Centre for Contemporary Art & the Natural World www.ccanw.co.uk

GreenMuseum www.greenmuseum.org

International EcoArt Network www.ecoartnetwork.org

EcoArtSpace www.ecoartspace.org

South Florida Environmental Art Project www.SFEAP.org

RSA Arts & Ecology (UK) www.artsandecology.org.uk

RSA Arts & Ecology Blog www.artsandecology.rsablogs.org.uk

The Centre for Sustainable Practice in the Arts (CalArts, USA) <http://www.sustainablepractice.org>

Aviva Rahmani <http://www.ghostnets.com>

EcoArt Centre, Israel <http://eco-art.asia/home.asp?CL=ENG>

The Harrison Studio <http://www.theharrisonstudio.net>

Cape Farewell <http://www.capefarewell.com>