

RE-FRAMING NATURE

Nina Czegledy
KMDI, University of Toronto
M5S3G6, Canada
Email: czegledy@interlog.com

Abstract

This paper is focused on historical human interventions in the environment, questioning: Why have we not learned from crucial precedents? Are we able to 're-Frame Nature', to mend, to any extent, some of the damage done? It proposes an underlying correlation between the diversity of perspectives as a way of indexing Humankind's relationship to Nature on a social and cultural basis. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Eco-activist art, which is able to re-Frame complex issues so that they maintain essential meaning, while the process itself facilitates changes in social attitude towards the environment, mainly through positive social innovation.

Keywords: nature, ecology, interventions, eco-activism, Eco-Activist art

In 1982 Agnes Dienes planted a 2-acre wheat field in downtown Manhattan. Her work fittingly illustrates the notion of 're-Framing Nature', in this case reaffirming a rural landscape in an urban setting. The act retains its resonance over three decades later, and is in line with the contemporary Eco-Activist (also described as Environmental Activist) Art movement. In keeping with the notion of 're-Framing', this text refers to human intrusion in Nature, and active reaction to this by art activists. While the history of environmental concerns dates back hundreds of years, a wider awareness emerged out of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, and led to contemporary social movements.

re-Framing can be defined as the process of changing the way a concept is presented so that it maintains its essential meaning but foregrounds a far more intricate situation. In this context, Nature may be considered as the world of living organisms and their environment. In a wider sense, Nature can also be understood to include particular aspects of space and time. Visual perspectives on Nature form a very specific thread that begins with the earliest depictions of Nature, continuing in various guises throughout time, and expressed today by significant art works. While today the media as well as the general public seem preoccupied (and rightly so!) with current ecological disasters, climate change has been a compelling factor in social collapse around the world for many centuries.

Over twenty centuries ago, Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus speculated on how "the draining of marshes had made a

particular locality more susceptible to freezing, and he hypothesized that lands became warmer when the clearing of forests exposed them to sunlight" [1]. Only lately, however, has it been recognized that social communities have often destroyed the sustainable basis of environmental resources on which their own societies depended. A number of famous historical examples eloquently described by Jared Diamond include Easter Island, the Mayan Empire, locales in the Middle East, and the Viking colonies in Greenland [2]; and we know that, due to ill-considered planning, many of the great forests of the Middle East practically disappeared nearly two thousand years ago; the great cedar forests of Lebanon, for example, mentioned in the Bible and other contemporary accounts, simply no longer exist [3]. The trend to clear-cut (to log an area by removing all of the trees) still persists. Between 2000 and 2008, more than 150,000 square kilometers of rainforest were cleared in the Brazilian Amazon [4]. Clear-cutting in California's world famous Redwood forest began in the early twentieth century. By the 1950s, mills were sawing more than a billion board feet of lumber a year, a level maintained until the mid-1970s; today less than 5 percent of the roughly two million acres of virgin forest remains, mostly in parks and forest reserves [5]. Jared Diamond also notes that past peoples were not ignorant, bad managers who deserved to be exterminated or dispossessed' they were people like us, facing problems broadly similar to those that we can't solve today, and were prone to succeed or fail depending on circumstances somewhat similar to those we now face.

The risk of an impending ecological collapse is an increasing concern on a wider level, especially as the environmental complexities confronting us today include some of the same factors that ruinously destabilized societies in the past. From this perspective, questions still remain to be answered. What made some societies especially vulnerable? What were the solutions that succeeded in the past? For instance, Aboriginal people in Australia, as Bill Gammage discovered, managed the land in a far more systematic and scientific fashion than European colonists and their descendants realized [6]. What can we learn from bygone cases, and from the messages (and warnings) that arise in the present?

These questions remain important to us,

and are being partially answered by artists interested in eliciting reflection on the fragile nature of Nature itself.

The dramatic shifts in representation of Nature over centuries have often been linked to complex religious, commercial and social considerations, the details of which are outside the scope of this text. Since the second half of the twentieth century there has been a critical transition from passive representation to art which 'fashions' nature, including Land Art. Lately, a critical discourse has emerged concerning environmental damage caused by some famous Land Art projects. Robert Smithson's celebrated Spiral Jetty, for instance, inflicted considerable, and permanent, damage upon the landscape. Glenn Harcourt noted, in his essay on the Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974 exhibition (MOCA, Los Angeles): "Artists like Robert Smithson and Heizer, for example, must always have been aware that their contest with the earth and its entropic forces was an asymmetrical one, in which even the displacement of 240,000 tons of rubble was in the end but a doubly negative and heroically impotent gesture" [7].

Patrick Blanc's vertical garden [8] is one among the thousands of ecological art projects reminding us of the ways in which we need to take increasing responsibility for our interventions in the natural environment, by re-Framing our perspectives, and our relationships with the world around us.

What is the direction of new art that seeks to acknowledge both the tensile strength and the hard fragility of the natural landscape? How are artists moving forward in limiting our impact on the landscapes around us, while celebrating their unique panoramas as a frame of conceptual analysis? Returning to the Redwood clear-cutting issue, Julia 'Butterfly' Hill, a well-known E-activist, spent 738 days over 180 feet off the ground, on a tiny, hand-built platform in an ancient California Redwood tree, to prevent loggers of the Pacific Lumber Company from cutting it down [9].

From New Zealand to Estonia, Eco-Activist Art has attained global visibility over the last decade. Many of the artworks, of various sizes and diverse materials, are presented outside the 'white box' of conventional gallery space.

The full range of these initiatives is outside the scope of this essay; sufficient to note that from "A Laboratory On The Open Fields" in the Czech Republic [10]

to the “Micronation/Macronation Project” by The House of Natural Fiber in Indonesia [11], Eco-Activist artists are continually and consistently producing and exhibiting, and remain fully engaged with the public.

These initiatives both question and confront the ways in which we have interfered in the natural environment. They remind us to remember, reflect, reconsider and ultimately re-Frame how we relate to the world around us. Moreover, such artists increasingly take on the role of alternative knowledge producers, involved in developing different models and presenting issues that are marginalized in mainstream culture. While Eco-Activist art is finding a foothold within the artistic domain, the question remains is this enough? Presently, I (along with many others) don't find simple answers to these burning questions.

References and Notes

1. Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* 1926 Vol. II. Loeb Classical Library, pp. 390-433
2. Diamond, J., *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, London, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005
3. Lebanon Cedar
http://www.blueplanetbiomes.org/lebanon_cedar.htm Accessed September 7, 2013
4. Clear cutting
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clearcutting> Accessed September 7, 2013
5. Redwoods
<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2009/10/redwoods/bourne-text/5> Accessed September 7, 2013
6. Gammage B., *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2011
7. Harcourt, G., *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974, Michael Heizer: Actual Size and Actual Size: Munich Rotary, Michael Heizer: Levitated Mass*
<http://x-traonline.org/article/work-site-world-rethinking-michael-heizer-through-ends-of-the-earth/> Accessed September 7, 2013
8. Patrick Blanc, Vertical Garden
<http://www.verticalgardenpatrickblanc.com/> accessed September 7, 2013
9. Butterfly Hill, J
<http://www.juliabutterfly.com/en/> accessed September 7, 2013
10. ALOTOF SummerLab
<<http://www.summerlabnantes.net/>> accessed June 30, 2013
11. HONF House of Natural Fiber 'Micronation/Macronation' <http://ix.natural-fiber.com/> accessed June 30, 2013