

A Natural Selection

Christopher Collier, artist & writer

I recently attended the exhibition Radical Nature at the Barbican, mainly I must confess because it contains the work of some of my favourite artists, amongst them Heather and Ivan Morrison who are based in Mid-Wales and who I had the pleasure of meeting last year in Machynlleth. It also contains the work of some important and well known figures that have been incredibly influential on the kind of work that I have produced in recent years (with its emphasis on ideological engagement, rural 'natural' space and site-specific, non-gallery based interventions) particularly Agnes Denes, Robert Smithson and Joseph Beuys. These artists began a way of working and defining practice that has come down to us in our time and actually enables me to work in the way that I do today. Smithson's seminal Spiral Jetty appeared in 1970, at the dawn of a new artistic paradigm in which Conceptual, Process-Based, Performance and Land Art began to take off and leave painting, print and sculpture somewhat for dead. This moment in art history was probably as significant as the innovations in oil painting and perspective in the Renaissance that gave art the illusion of reality or the invention of photography in the 19th Cent that emancipated it from that illusion. This is possibly a somewhat controversial opinion but one that I fundamentally believe; this is art for the third millennium. However, if we as a species are going to make it much further into this new millennium I fear that, thematically at least, the kind of work on display here may become increasingly urgent and relevant.

The role-call of artists taking part in this show reads something like a list of artists that I personally admire or find interesting but that aside this was undoubtedly a fascinating and excellent exhibition and one that has made me consider in much greater depth than previously the portrayal of the 'natural' in art. The thoughts that I had on the matter I will share with you now.

In a sense 'nature' as a subject for art dates right back to art's very earliest known form in the example of wild animals depicted in Prehistoric cave paintings. It is true to say however that just as these ancient paintings vary from the landscape gardening of 'Capability' Brown, from the epistemological classifications of Gilpin's theories on the Picturesque or from the sublime infusion of Wordsworth's Prelude, so too art's treatment of 'nature' since the late 1960s has entered into a new phase. With the development of art in conceptual directions, the dissolution of liberal hegemony and with the institutions of Church and family in decline in the West, culturally mediated relationships with nature have inevitably altered. Characterised by a growing awareness of the human impact upon (and degradation of) the natural sphere works of art relating to nature since that time have tended to become more politically engaged whilst mirroring the wider disintegration of metaphysical outlooks into purely physical ones. Refusing to view nature as some pseudo-spiritual external entity and drawing on emergent systems theory and cybernetics, new cultural approaches to nature see it not in colonialist terms as separate or 'other' from Western humanity, rather as deeply integrated, interrelated and indeed inseparably 'one' with human civilisation.

This exhibition does not take quite as cross-disciplinary an approach as I introduced in the above paragraph, it does however take in a commendably broad and eclectic sweep of ecologically engaged art and architectural practice since the 1960s. It includes the previously mentioned seminal figures alongside younger artists such as the Morrises and Simon Starling, all united by this engagement that borders on (and frequently crosses into) ideological activism and utopian/dystopian vision. It is an exhibition that in its form

mirrors its specific concerns, deconstructing boundaries between indoor and outdoor space, culture and nature, just as post-1960s environmentalism has sought to deconstruct the conventional (and false) division between humankind and nature. Trees and animals are brought into the gallery space, art is taken out beyond the gallery and off-site. It attempts to disrupt what US psychologist Willis Harman described as 'the ontological assumption of separateness' that derives ultimately from the both the egocentric rationality of the Greeks and the monotheistic dualism of spiritual and worldly inherent in the Judeo-Christian position. The inheritance of this set of cultural assumptions has both informed and been reinforced by Humanism, Colonialism and Industrial Capitalism to the extent that we have largely become alienated from the natural world to such an extent that we are seriously threatening the very future survival of our species. It is a distinction not so pronounced in Eastern modes of thought that often take a more holistic or atavistic approach to the world (for example in the doctrines of Atman and Brahman as found in Hindu philosophy) and which frequently do not draw a distinction between spirit and world in the fashion of Western culture. Within this way of thinking there is more commonly found a personification of the object than the objectification of the person as found in the West.

In the West the change towards a more modern ecological thinking began to occur in that epoch of youthful rebellion, similar in many ways to the upheavals of the 1960s, the era of Romanticism. The Romantics were in several instances proto-environmentalists and whilst the notion of the sublime, at least in some cases, would appear to reinforce the separation between man and nature, in other Romantic works a Pantheism is displayed that for the first time in the Western cultural tradition transcends the dualistic mode of thinking. Whilst the likes of Rousseau recasting the archetypal myth of a 'golden age' in which nature existed separately and in perfection prior to the 'civilising' interventions of humankind actually increased a sense of separation from nature, other works of the era engendered a different result. In the paintings of Casper David Friedrich nature exists, as for Rousseau, as a primeval force. In Friedrich's works however nature itself encapsulates a metaphysical presence: the distinctions between world and spirit are deconstructed. Here humanity stands, like Friedrich's *Der Wanderer Über dem Nebelmeer*, not imperialistically surveying a dominion of commodity and exploitation (as for instance in earlier landscape works such as Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*) but in awe and reverence. Even this approach however contained dangers. Whilst such an approach encouraged a respect for nature in its primary form, uninfluenced by humankind and not merely for its cultivated potential or use as a commodity for exploitations, it also showed humanity as insignificant before nature's numinous majesty. This did however mark an important step change in so much as it presented nature as possessing value in itself, rather than in its potential economic value to humanity. This was a shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric that was indeed revolutionary. It did however, essentially not leave room for the belief that humankind could detrimentally affect the natural world although this is a possibility acknowledged in Blake's 'dark Satanic mills'. Other works went further in deconstructing this separation between humanity and nature, in Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' he speaks of

...something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,

And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, — both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul Of all my moral being.

This piece of text is worth quoting at length because it is fascinating in so much as it prefigures much later debates in the field of 'Ecocriticism'. Here Wordsworth acknowledges that man is part of nature and that nature is to be found within human nature, it has the power to heal, inspire and guide. To him everything is natural as nature 'rolls through all things', he does however concede that whilst nature may exist in itself, it is still to an extent socially constructed. He describes 'all the mighty world Of eye, and ear, - both what they half create And what perceive'. This is fascinating in the way it prefigures Postmodern theoretical debates and the social/linguistic constructivist standpoint that they adopt. Contemporary Ecocriticism is at odds with this general theoretical orthodoxy in that it holds that 'nature' is not entirely a cultural construct and that its properties are largely inherent and not imposed socially and linguistically by humankind. Ecocriticism holds that nature need not be considered a discourse and that exists independently of culture. Wordsworth seems to be taking a middle ground, stating that his concept of nature is half created, constructed in his act of perception or 'reading'.

Ruskin would describe something similar to this anthropomorphising tendency, coining the phrase in his 1856 third volume of *Modern Painters* 'pathetic fallacy' to describe the attribution of human traits to natural objects and phenomena. Perceiving nature as possessing human traits is not the same as viewing it as inseparable and 'one' with humanity, instead it betrays a fundamentally anthropocentric way of looking at the world. In many ways a product of the Romantic movement, Ruskin was also strikingly prescient in his attitudes towards the natural environment. He was the first British writer to speculate that nature's capacity to heal itself might not be infinite and his famous rallying cry to artists instructed them to put aside their cultural assumptions, their constructed notions (inherent in traditional landscape painting at the time) and perceive nature with a scientific rigour. This was a rigour that he himself possessed, prefiguring climate change debates in his lectures, having become convinced after twenty years of close observations that he had witnessed changes in atmospheric conditions and weather patterns as a result of the insipid air pollution to be found in 19th cent. London. In calling for such an objective assessment of nature he sought to engender what was essentially an ecocentric standpoint, attempting to access nature in itself, outside of cultural constructs. This, according to Postmodern theory, is impossible, indeed the Kantian notion of 'Das ding an sich' and the concept of the noumenon would suggest that it is so. This does not however preclude from Ruskin's standpoint that nature, aside from human constructions, does itself exist and have value. He gave the following famous call in his first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843) that was taken up by the idealistic young Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood whom I would argue are underrated and unjustly eclipsed by the Impressionists as the first manifestation of Modernism in art. Over a century later much of the spirit of his address has been adopted by many of the artists represented in the Radical Nature exhibition today.

Go to Nature in all her singleness of heart,
and walk with her laboriously and trustingly,
having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning,
and remember her instruction,
rejecting nothing,

selecting nothing and scorning nothing;
believing all things to be right and good,
and rejoicing always in the truth.

In fact in Impressionism, Expressionism and right through the Avant Garde movements of Modernism in general nature became once more largely alienated from culture. Art became to a considerable extent preoccupied with the industrial, the urban, with social and political relations and with perception and modes of representation. Modernism inherited the radicalism of the Romantic era but failed to inherit its preoccupation with nature. Effectively the only natural themes to appear within Modernism are those that appear in a brand of pseudo-Surrealism (the likes of O'Keeffe), in some brief dalliances with Neo-Romanticism in the form of Nash, Sutherland etc. and the likes of the Regionalists. The Expressionistic landscapes of Klee or Matisse can not truly be said to be concerned with nature and the naturalistic landscapes of Andrew Wyeth can not be said to be truly Modernist. We are left with the problem that nature was ultimately not considered to be 'modern'. In fact it was often only photography, through the likes of Ansel Adams and Wynn Bullock, that kept an artistic focus upon the natural environment in the first half of the 20th cent. Likewise in the Modernist phase of many other art forms nature largely returned to being a setting and an aesthetic decoration for the anthropocentric action. In Architecture 'natural' forms and materials were anathema and geometric, supposedly 'pure' forms were espoused culminating in the concrete Brutalism manifested in the Barbican itself.

It is only with the end of Modernism and the collapse of many of its ideological tenants that nature once more became a focus of critically engaged artistic practice. Conversely whilst the avant garde ideologies of Modernism were collapsing into the ironic post-ideological output of Postmodernism there ran a contrary strand of art practice (smaller but still significant) parallel to the general direction of the cultural paradigm. For within Postmodern there definitely lies a separate strand of practice that whilst breaking with Modernism in many significant ways continues its radical and ideologically engaged outlook. Emerging to an extent from the activism of the 1960s and centring largely upon Performance Art, Process-based art and so-called Land Art an ideologically engaged practice survived and continues largely to this day as manifested in many of the artists displayed in this exhibition. The issue ultimately comes down to the division that I touched upon earlier in terms of literature between those that take a theoretically socio-linguistic constructivist approach in keeping with mainstream Postmodernism and those that hold that whilst cultural constructs exist, that important truths also exist outside of human interpretation. It is this belief that I would postulate informs the environmentally engaged practices of many of the artists in the Radical Nature exhibition.

In the 1960s an increased ecological awareness emerged with books such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) capturing large sections of the public imagination. Much of the 1960s radical/protest agenda incorporated an ecological dimension into its utopian ideologies. This came more sharply into focus in the form of the Earth Summit of 1972 and the oil crisis of '73 that underlined more starkly than ever humanity's dependence upon the natural environment. Beuys began to create work concerned with healing: personal healing, healing of cultures scarred by the war, and healing of the natural environment itself. We are back to Wordsworth's 'nurse, The guide, the guardian of my heart'. At this time Land Art also emerged with the aim to remove art from museums and galleries, instead creating a synthesis of nature and culture, not static as in the 2nd millennium commodity model of art as dead labour but alive in the temporal moment as an entity in itself. In fact Land Art owed much to the landscaping traditions that run from ancient Greece and Thales as well as the Buddhist Zen traditions through formal gardens to

theories of the Picturesque as found in the writings of Gilpin, the works of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown as mentioned at the beginning of this post and the landscape architecture of modern urban planners. It should be seen in the context of a long history of human aesthetic interventions in nature although separated from those in that it pertains to the sphere of 'high art' with no practical or overtly decorative purpose. The ultimate failure of the 1960s utopian dreams finds a neat encapsulation in the Morrisons' installation of a geodesic dome out on the Barbican terrace. It enters into a fascinating dialogue with Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome within the gallery space itself (in which is played an inspirational video of Buckminster Fuller still very much espousing his utopian dreams) and hints at the fact that his revolutionary design was flawed and inevitably failed to deliver the utopia that he had hoped. On another level it also enters into a similar dialogue with the all-encompassing mass of the Barbican complex that surrounds its surprisingly small and slightly vulnerable appearing form, the harsh Brutalist architecture totally enveloping and towering over it. The increasingly inviting wooden dome seems somehow in this context still more profound as a space of escape, like a childhood den or imaginary spacecraft (as hinted by the perspex dome on the roof). The surrounding concrete complex itself, much like Buckminster Fuller's dome, is representative of an other failed utopian dream manifested through architecture. This interplay of built and natural space, outside and inside, utopia and escape is a master stroke from curator Francesco Manacorda.

With the emergence, post-1960s, of systems theory and cybernetics the systems that underpinned society and nature could be analysed and compared as parallel and interconnected. This gave rise to whole new forms of artistic investigation as represented in this exhibition by the likes of Newton Harrison, Helen Meyer Harrison and Hans Haacke. Keeping faith with the ideological preoccupations of the 1960s artists such as Beuys and Agnes Denes actively integrated political activism into their practice. Beuys' F.I.U. In Defence of Nature and Denes' Tree Mountain are the obvious examples referenced here in this exhibition. Indeed manifestos form an important dimension in the practice of many of the artists contained in this show and Beuys himself went on to become one of the founding members of the Green Party in the Federal Republic of Germany. This emphasis on activism and pedagogy was distinct from mainstream Postmodernist art where the idea that anything might relegate the importance of the art itself to a secondary concern was distinctly unfashionable.

To others the spatial context of the work was a vital as the political, Haacke stated that his intention was to 'make something which cannot 'perform' without the assistance of its environment'. Smithson's revolutionary concept of the site/non-site dialectic expanded on this in its insistence that a gallery object (the non-site) formed an abstracted fragment of an external location (the site) imported into a cultural context. In my analysis this concept further sought to deconstruct the conventional barriers between culture and nature, internal and external. I hold it to be an extremely interesting concept that is essentially semiotic and touches upon the constructivist view of the linguistic domination of the world as discussed in relation to Wordsworth and ecocriticism earlier. Again, it is potentially an essentially Kantian assertion, placing nature from the perspective of art in the position of a noumenon and stating that only through abstractions can nature truly enter the cultural sphere. It is better he states instead for culture to enter the natural sphere, the 'site' that exists in itself, un-abstracted; in Ruskin's words to 'Go to Nature in all her singleness of heart'. This has, I believe, fundamental implications for site-specific work at least in terms of nature and effectively implies that representational work is essentially philosophically less preferable to the site-specific. It is like the difference between a thing itself and a photograph of a thing; the 'non-site' becomes a 3D picture, metonymically, fetishistically and 'homoeopathically' connected to its the 'site'. This evokes metaphysical notions of the

'genius loci' and the place of the fetish in the atavistic mode of thought. It brings to mind works such as Walter de Maria's Earth Room. It is interesting from a semiotic perspective in that it essentially deconstructs Liberal Humanist dualistic concepts of signifier and signified, culture and nature, spirit and matter and hence the construction of the material world as commodity. An agrarian economy 'naturally' views nature as commodity, industrialisation fetishises this commodity and a post-industrial economy completes the divorce entirely. On this analysis the rise of capital is intimately linked to ecological alienation and environmental decline just as the clear link between colonialism and deforestation has been discussed by others. Perhaps a glimpse of hope for the future lies in the fact that emerging economies such as China exercise far greater control over their ecological impact, this coupled with a philosophical inheritance less fixed on Western dualism at least offers a potential way forward. 'Narrow is the way that leads to life' however and whilst exhibitions such as this go some way to countering the industrially funded environmental misinformation campaigns ultimately it is just the latest in the long line of similarly themed exhibitions. It is confirmation once again that hegemony no longer operates in a linear, top-down, epistemological fashion but is deeply inherent in our very networks, relations, choices and desires. Only a truly cultural shift can possibly affect the change required but such a change will likely have to be self-produced and self-organising. Western (particularly US) responses are wholly inadequate; populations abdicate responsibility for climate change to scientific experts whilst falling prey to the commodification of even this ideology, deferring to the potentially exploitative commercial rhetoric of 'sustainability' which presents a falsely classless vision of environmental degradation. In reality the world's poor are hit hardest whilst the ruling classes of the West apply a failed Neo-Liberalist logic to the problem, espousing innovative technological solutions, sustainable growth, off-setting in a form of Carbon debt management and the export of pollution to the developing world as if it were the transfer of capital. Essentially the consensus is to retreat from state-led solutions or radical economic ideas (such as Swyngedouw's model of economies without growth) instead applying market logic to the problem as a means of abdicating responsibility. It is essential to both refute the Leftist view that 'nature' is a hegemonic construct intended to vindicate the alleged and illusory 'natural order' of the class structure and simultaneously to refute the capitalist lie that global warming is a socialist conspiracy aimed at imposing state control on corporations and markets. In fact the Left has a great inheritance in the natural sciences, Marx considered Kapital to be a parallel analysis to Darwin's On the Origin of Species an indeed wanted to dedicate sections of the book to Darwin (Darwin demurred). However, just because Marx admired the theorist of evolution this will no doubt imply to significant numbers of influential morons in the US that just as evolution and socialism are clearly evil conspiracies, thus too is global warming an elaborate, atheist, leftist hoax. This is the great struggle of our times, all other struggles, even the class struggle or struggle against Imperialism, can surely not be considered as important as the very fate of the planet itself? This is not an argument to abandon those efforts rather than to stress the importance of nature as an integral point of struggle. However as I have argued, in the Postmodern paradigm nature and culture have converged and blurred whilst the domination of Neo-Liberalism and its doctrine of 'biopolitics' has largely nullified ideology, infiltrating and defining culture with its ubiquitous and ontological form of hegemony. Therefore it is no longer enough to trust culturally constructed notions of nature and environmentalism; the optimistic, market system of small acts of sustainability that might be described as 'light green' in the ecocritical terminology of Bate's The Sons of the Earth are no longer sufficient. Whilst small acts of responsibility, such as recycling a wine bottle, may be positive in themselves they are part of a larger hegemonic system of distraction in which the major causes of environmental degradation and threat go largely unchallenged ie. the meat industry, deforestation, oil consumption, the military-industrial complex (including nuclear).

Traditionally there has been a division between the literary schools of ecocriticism to be found in the US and the UK. Whilst the Americans have remained more positive and celebratory, placing emphasis of the sublime wilderness of nature and small acts of individual responsibility in terms of halting further degradation, the British school has been characteristically more pessimistic in outlook. There has a tendency to perceive nature as more threatened but also more threatening. The difference in positions could come from the psychological difference in living in a vast and in many areas still empty country and a small, over-crowded island, however it is the British Ecocritical position, closer to what Bate's called 'dark green', that may be required now. Humans and particular Neo-Liberalist capitalism are fundamentally part of the problem and only through a radical overhaul of cultural assumptions and economic conditions can we hope to sufficiently address the pressing issue of the natural environment of which we find ourselves inseparably a part.

All in all a stunning exhibition. I particularly enjoyed the Morrisons, Richard Buckminster Fuller, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Agnes Denes, Anya Gallaccio, Tue Greenfort, Tomas Saraceno and Simon Starling. From a political perspective let's just hope that it gets a few more people thinking about the issues involved in the way in which it got me thinking and then it will have truly been a success. From an artistic perspective I think that in this exhibition and this form of working we could be looking at the new form of ideologically engaged art to inherit the discredited mantle of Postmodernism that has fallen from grace following the recent financial turmoil and the resultant crisis of Neo-Liberalism. Art of a radical nature could be the art of the future.