

Remediate/Re-Vision: Public Artists Engaging the Environment

August 1 – November 28, 2010

Presented by Wave Hill [NYC] and Cambridge Arts Council [MA]

Artists in the exhibition:

Lillian Ball

Jackie Brookner

Mags Harries and Lajos Héder

Natalie Jeremijenko

Patricia Johanson

Lorna Jordan

Matthew Mazzotta

Eve Mosher

Buster Simpson

Susan Leibovitz Steinman, Suzanne Lacy, and Yutaka Kobayashi

George Trakas

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE

by Suzaan Boettger

Wish you were there? Like missives from idyllic elsewhere, the modest-size images and texts displayed in this exhibition picture a world where ambitious artists act as ethical (re)mediators of the environment. We know that to “know” a place, there is nothing like being there. These postcards illustrating the environmentalist edge of contemporary art serve as both enticements to go there and models of harmonic interactions.

In this realm, the species “artist-in-public-places” is a mixture not only of sculptor and environmental scientist (within a person or among collaborators), but of anthropologist, community negotiator, teacher, social director and project manager; and who is also implicitly a

philosopher of nature, advocate of environmentalism; and oh, yes, a producer maybe of objects, or more likely of environments, but definitely of experiences. This poly-disciplinary identity manifests an increasing recognition that former certainties of fixed dichotomies—say, between the domains of “art” and either of “science” or “politics”; of independent “nature” and the “culture” that acts upon it; between characteristics of the “human” and the “animal,” or what is appropriate to “male” and to “female” behavior—are each more accurately thought of as a continuum. Conceptions of the work of art and of behavior appropriate to a gender (particularly that of woman, which 11 of these 15 are, an accurate representation of environmentalist engagement by artists), are expansive. These aspects are tacit; they’re nobody’s direct subject matter. Yet it is the artists’ enactment of hybrid identities and actions, and their application of them to the most urgent crisis of our time—that of anthropogenic global warming producing an environment in disequilibrium—that puts them in the artistic vanguard. (1)

“Remediate/Re-Vision”’s documentary mode (with an appropriately low carbon footprint) continues a practice utilized just over 40 years ago in the first exhibition in the United States at least nominally related to this topic called Ecological Art at John Gibson Projects for Commissions, New York—which also consisted of photographs, drawings, and scale models. (2) Characteristic of late-modernist era earth art, that show’s so-called ecologic interaction of life forms and the environment actually investigated the formal properties of natural matter, the phenomenological experience of moving within vast marked or sculptured terrain and the extension of the domain of the artwork to the wilderness. And whereas earthworks’ radical reshaping was paid for by wealthy individuals who grooved with the artists’ bold transgressions, the present projects are more public in their locales’ accessibility, their sources of funding in

governmental agencies and in invoking “the environment” as, in the widest sense, shared.

By the 1980s, urban public sculpture’s convention of modernist abstractions began to give way to what art historian Hal Foster has articulated as “a new longing for referentiality, for a grounding in identity and community.” (3) Projects became more user-friendly, figurative and historically or socially relevant. To fast forward past the sculptors who construct elegant and intentionally transient forms out of sticks and stones in the countryside, and the photographers who (en)gross us with the dispiriting spectacles of rutted deserts, vaporizing icecaps and coal mining depredations, we arrive at the present work. Now, evidence of global warming is common in news media, sustainability is the buzzword in product design, green is trendy in advertising. These artists’ works stimulate a holistic awareness of nature as a vulnerable network, but do so not by direct consciousness-raising or displays of nature as precious or precarious, but in the down-and-dirty work of practical outcomes in the environment.

In contrast to the terrestrial focus of “earth” works and “land” art made at a time when Western deserts were considered to be vacant expanses apt for unconstrained manipulation, along with the turn from spatially environmental art to genuinely ecological environmentalist art, the arena in which these artists act often relates to water. So far, 2010’s global weather trajectory will make it the warmest year on record. Increased greenhouse gases have generated greater ocean evaporation, rainfall and sea level rises due to melting icecaps, floods, severe drought and “chaotic” climate extremes. (4) Contiguity to water pertains to projects here by Lillian Ball; Jackie Brookner; Mag Harries and Lajos Héder; Natalie Jeremijenko; Patricia Johanson; Lorna Jordan; Susan Leibovitz Steinman, Suzanne Lacy and Yutaka Kobayashi; and George Trakas. Eve Mosher’s green roof project helps reduce local temperature; Buster Simpson’s *Monolith*

displays a historic flood line and refers to the Shasta Dam, crucial to valley irrigation and flood control systems. Matthew Mazzotta captures canine waste, before it produces greenhouse gases, and converts it into energy. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's project for New York City's former garbage dump upturns discards into gifts, prompting greater consciousness about material excess.

Among the group, these projects reflect current varying balances of attention to aesthetics, subject matter and community engagement. Simpson's finesse of an abandoned concrete plant—with illustrative chambers, a bronze scale model of the plant, sandblasted poetry and a column of hard hats spiraling water to a company safe—into sculpture-as-historical-exhibit, or vice versa, displays creative imagination and material artistry. Trakas's *Newtown Creek Nature Walk* interplays the drama of architectural experiences of containment and release with that of proximity to massive industrial structures and to the water's edge. Jordan's terraced curvilinear demarcations are syncopated by varied colored stone and desert plants to direct watershed flow and provide sites of respite. In Johanson's disguise of a water recycling facility as a lush naturalistic park and wetlands, her landscape design icon of a salt marsh harvest mouse serves to bring attention to a local species threatened by extinction. Conversely, what would be conventionally recognizable as the "hand of the artist" is almost imperceptible in the ingenious islands devised by Brookner to counteract a degraded lagoon, except for the periodic eruptions of mist; or in Ball's *Waterwash*, except for the walkway's unusual sparkle and crisp design. In contrast to Ball's initiating determination, the central path of Susan Leibovitz Steinman, Suzanne Lacy and Yutaka Kobayashi's *Project for Elkhorn City* links a series of sites of local historical resonance (re)discovered through extensive meetings with the community. And Mosher sets metaphor and material facture aside completely in favor of instrumentalist projects inciting direct

public dialogue and self-help activism.

In their varied ways, these artists' works enact the ethical responsiveness that follows from the recognition articulated by the French social scientist Bruno Latour that "The destiny of all the cosmos is fully interconnected now that through our very progress and our own very proliferating numbers, we have taken the earth on our shoulders." (5) Their projects are at once ecologically ameliorative and encouraging of others' experiential engagement, inviting the public to participate in a dynamic dialogue between site, audience and the encompassing environment.

1. As part of the paper "Global Surface Temperature Change" by James Hanson, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, New York, NY, and his colleagues, "What Global Warming Looks Like," presents a vivid picture.

http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2010/20100813_WhatGlobalWarmingLooksLike.pdf.

Accessed on August 27, 2010.

2. "Ecologic Art" was on view May 17–June 28, 1969 at John Gibson Projects for Commissions, 27 East 67th Street, NYC. The participating artists were Carl Andre, Christo, Jan Dibbets, Peter Hutchinson, Will Insley, Richard Long, Claes Oldenburg, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Morris and Bob [Robert] Smithson. A source of Gibson's reframing of the new sculptural practice of "earthworks," (which debuted in an eponymous show at the Dwan Gallery the previous October) as "ecologic" was probably the largest oil spill then to date, in the Santa Barbara (CA) channel, which has been described as "igniting the environmental movement."

http://www.geog.ucsb.edu/~jeff/sb_69oilspill/69oilspill_articles2.html. Accessed on August 27, 2010.

3. Hal Foster, "Antinomies in Art History," *Design and Crime (and other Diatribes)*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, p. 92.

4. Justin Gillis, "In Weather Chaos, a Case for Global Warming," *New York Times*, August 14, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/science/earth/15climate.html?scp=1&sq=weather%20chaos&st=cse>. Accessed on August 27, 2010. And a week later, 20% of Pakistan is under water, in NE China over a quarter million people are being evacuated because of floods, and the U.S. National Weather Service announced of a flash flood warning in Queens, NY. The world will end not with a bang or a whimper, but a gurgle.

5. Bruno Latour, "May Nature Be Recomposed? A Few Questions of Cosmopolitics," The Neale Wheeler Watson Lecture 2010, Nobel Museum, Svenska Akademiens Börssal, May 11 2010.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ie-_erFVz5A, at 19:56. Accessed on August 27, 2010.

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