

UNDERPINNINGS

Art and Environmentalist Practice

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The invocation of end times and the urgent need for new hope are common themes structuring left ecology as well as far-right cultural discourse today. In a recent essay, Joel Kovel raised the spectre of millennialism, reminding us of the fine line between rejecting revivalist panic and descending into pessimistic gloom. Kovel reminds us that the Left has no stirring calls for inspired action with which to combat the genuinely apocalyptic scenario of Earth's ecological collapse. "Our era's greatest challenge," he maintains, is to contend with the awareness that we may render the Earth uninhabitable.

But how do we respond to this prospect of end time while "neither minimizing [the] gravity" of this scenario, "nor succumbing to irrational panic?" Struggling for metaphors that summon a possible progressive reaction to the endtimesque dangers of nuclear annihilation, ecological breakdown, endless war, discrimination and exploitation, Kovel calls briefly upon art. The progressive role of art in a time of political unfreedom is important to think about—we commonly invoke it, but are often at a loss to describe what such a movement would look and feel like. Indeed, Kovel himself drops this line of argument after discussing one example, a film which sets the figure of an African child "redemptively against universal ruin."

I want to return to this point in Joel Kovel's article and re-examine it for some other possibilities. I support Kovel's gesture towards the radical possibilities in/of art, but I want to suggest ways in which art can be practiced in modes other than the transcendent, and ways in which eco-crisis, race and social inequality can be figured in modes other than the tragic/redemptive. I offer some quick examples of political/ecological art that is engaged with questions of ecology and equality to suggest that there is both more complexity and more possibility in this field than the environmental Left has yet fully considered.

When we invoke the arts, we often assume a model of humanistic practice that seeks to transcend everyday life: the sublime force of the artwork lifts us above our depressing realities and offers a source of eschatological hope, nirvana, transcendence, or redemption. Marxist cultural theory has offered elaborate critiques of art-as-transcendent, showing how notions of transcendent artistic truth have historically hinged on bourgeois notions of individual consciousness rising above historical and material conditions. Nevertheless, transcendent art continues to figure as a popular trope in narratives of hope for a better future. Nor is this simply a popular misconstruing of the political role of art; indeed much "high" art, as well as activist narrative (including popular art, video documentary, and net art), does willingly cathect the seductive rhetoric of transcendence. Perhaps this trope persists because it implicitly places the artist in the position of a messiah, and because the alternative seems so dishearteningly, unglamorously, difficult (how could artists and activists, as individuals, possibly engage the mess of social, political, scientific and economic relations that must be disentangled in order to forge alternative futures?) But a growing area of artistic practice, populated largely by politically progressive artists and animated by collaborative

models of solidarity and intervention, has already rejected what photographer Connie Samaras calls the “romantic master plans of heroic individualism.” Instead, this art has shaped modes of engagement with the world that subvert and marginalize the grand narratives of solo romantic transcendence in both science and the arts.

Political art serves a more complicated role than simply responding to an urgent need for artists to render their products useful to a political cause. A brief look at this “new” artistic practice at the boundaries of science and culture might here be more helpful than the longer task of revisiting and updating critical theoretical re-readings of art for the current political and ecological climate. Take for instance the work of artist/engineer Natalie Jeremijenko, who mobilizes issues of environmental justice and social activism via so-called “new” media art, staging processual interactive pieces that mobilize community eco-concerns in conjunction with electronics and computation design. Her 2003 art project, *Feral Robotic Dogs*, for example, weaves together disparate elements and actors, including off-the-shelf toy robot dogs, teams of amateur designers, and engineering students who hack the toys’ operating systems to render them sensitive to environmental toxins and equip them with souped-up mobility and communication systems, and communities of people living in toxic sites. The toxin-sniffing dogs have been released in numerous contexts—artistic, scientific, and educational. For example, in a June 2003 release carried out by a group of 12-15-year-olds with the Bronx River Art Center, the dogs sniffed out volatile organic compounds that accumulated through the 19th century around gas plants on the Bronx River. “By sending out the overhauled toys to detect pollutants in different areas around the country, Ms. Jeremijenko aims to draw local attention to environmental hazards,” reported *The New York Times*. Simultaneously, the art press reported this as a contemporary art piece, one of many appearing these days at the intersection of the arts, environmental activism, and engineering.

Three years later, *The New York Times* was a lot more hip to this kind of art, proclaiming in a headline about the San Jose art festival, ZeroOne, “Paintings Are So Last Century.” In August 2006, the paper reported on the most recent art/ecology project to be released, and addressed the most common public query about whether this was really “art.”

A small fleet of homing pigeons will be released from a plaza near the San Jose Museum of Art to fly back to their trainer about 10 miles away. But these are not your average birds. Each will be carrying, in a tiny nylon backpack, some very small equipment that gives their journey a larger purpose: a global positioning system unit for tracking their latitude, longitude and altitude; a pollution monitor for gauging carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides; and the fundamentals of a cellphone for sending this data to a Web site.

The artist-activist Beatriz da Costa calls the resulting Web site a “pigeon blog” ... Ms. da Costa calls her pigeon blog “a blend of art and activism,” noting how difficult it is, Al Gore’s efforts notwithstanding, to draw attention to issues like pollution through the usual forms of campaigning ... “So much activism has the opposite effect of change, badgering the topic until we’re used to it,” she said. “But art offers a way of generating attention, a way of disturbing things” ... The ZeroOne participants tend to position themselves as conceptual artists trying to redirect patterns of attention and perception. “Beatriz’s work looks nothing like a Picasso painting,” Mr. Dietz, the festival director, said of her pigeon-blog art. “But it does look something like a Gordon Matta-Clark gesture, putting a chainsaw through a house.” Then there’s the old chestnut that, at its onset, artistic innovation is always hard to recognize. “Once upon a time Monet’s ‘Water Lilies’ were not considered art, or they were considered very, very bad art,” Mr. Dietz said.

I cite these reviews from *The New York Times* as opposed to the numerous artistic and scholarly commentaries on this work simply to show that this form of ecologically engaged art is already out there in the world, engaged in the same battles as we are. Artists, scientists, pigeon breeders and high school students work side by side to investigate pollutants and toxins in their skies and neighborhoods. The model of working together is different from the idea of consuming transcendence; the former produces better art *and* better politics.

Neither the popular media nor most artistic and scholarly commentators, however, bring to their analysis the same methodological historical commitments that red-green political ecologists could. For *CNS* readers, I think the burning question is unlikely to be about whether or not this practice (art/technology/activism) is really “art” formally conceived. Rather it is more likely to revolve around the ways in which this form of artistic practice—as opposed to the creation of art objects that seek to be transcendent and inspirational—can engage us in collective forms of resistance to the neoliberal systems that accelerate scales of immiseration and render large portions of the earth uninhabitable.

Art that engages with contemporary technologies and communities, via its form, content, and processual deployment, is particularly well-placed to stage interventions and conversations about our place within ongoing transnational ecological processes. Artists who move away from the imperative to produce objects of transcendent beauty still contend with questions of the design and elegance of the artwork, its position at the node of multiple sites-of-knowledge production, and its role as a boundary object that can fix or call into question implicit assumptions that shape life practices.

In offering two examples of art/science pieces that consciously eschew the painterly stereotype of the art object, I do not mean to suggest that only “new media” technologies and robotic art are suited to staging political conversations. The vexed question of Earth’s habitability itself has been hauntingly staged by artist Connie Samaras’ photographs, taken during an NSF-funded Antarctica expedition. As an artist funded by a science foundation, Samaras occupied a critical role at the nexus of environmental research, exploration, and nationalism. Occupying a role previously inhabited by the most classic heroic male scientific image-makers, this feminist photographer simultaneously engages the historical, political, aesthetic and formal tropes of landscape, ecology, and science. As critic Elena Glasberg writes, “wedged between the Heroic past and a future of a hyper modernized South Pole,” Samaras produces an artistic image that is “both a politicized one and a perfectly composed enactment of an aesthetic constriction in which new beauty and action may be produced.” Her images, never didactic or propagandistic, compel us to consider human histories of exploration in space as well as on planet Earth, in all their hubristic yet powerful, dysfunctional and fantastic complexity. As art curator Ciara Ennis puts it, the work “suggests an alien and dysfunctional future where the drive for survival dictates a bizarre civilization of transience, occupying but never inhabiting.” Artist Joyce Campbell approaches the same landscape, but using photographic technology that is as recalcitrantly obsolete as Samaras’ is digitally modern. Campbell uses daguerrotype and silver gelatin technologies (anachronistically, since they were already superseded before the late 19th century South Pole expeditions), and alludes to romantic, transcendent landscape photographic techniques. However, her stunning images subvert and undermine the heroic gaze of the standard

masculinist exploration narrative by subtly playing with scale, composition and technique. Viewing it, Ciara Ennis experiences a clearly environmentalist reaction, describing it as “a landscape that is clearly wounded from the exponential effects of climate change—suggesting that unless we radically amend our irresponsible ways that we, like daguerrotypes, will be rendered obsolete.” A third Antarctica artist, photographer Anne Noble, offers wry commentary on science museums as well as monotone contemplative close-ups of blizzards, unsettling the viewer’s scientific and aesthetic certainties. As Ennis describes it, Noble’s art “offer[s] an alternative to the conventional framing of Antarctica as heroic, romantic and sublime.”

It is difficult to describe the power of these images solely through a textual recounting. However, I offer these examples (with the hope that readers will be able to view their work elsewhere), because they serve to complicate our understanding of political art as eschewing the transcendent and beautiful. Each of these artists walks the fine line between transcendent beauty and trenchant political critique, never falling into either the trap of decorativeness or of didacticism.

All of the artists I mention here identify in some way with environmentalism, feminism, and a critique of capital’s economic depredation. But none employs heavy-handed slogans or transcendentalist humanism. Art critics and journalists, who do not approach the work with environmentalist goals in mind, are left grappling with complex questions about the interconnected histories and futures of humans, ecologies, built environments, toxins, race, gender, and landscapes.

In a recent autobiographical essay entitled “Living the Eleventh Thesis,” biologist Richard Levins recalled, “when I was a boy, I always assumed that I would grow up to be a scientist and a Red. Rather than face a problem of combining activism and scholarship, I would have had a very difficult time trying to separate them.” Levins grew up in the mid-20th century; many other scientists of his generation shared his experience of a scientific life filled with leftist activism. For young intellectuals growing up in the early 21st century, science and activism, ecology and equality, are no less intertwined, even though our pedagogical disciplinary systems endeavor daily to separate artists from engineers, theorists from activists.

Those at the art/science/environment juncture face head-on the challenge of our century, attempting daily to be artists, activists, dialecticians, and scientific practitioners simultaneously. Their fellow travelers are already on board—art critics, robot designers, amateur scientists, professional hackers, and post-disciplinary anarchists. The voices of red-green political ecologists belong in this engagement. As I have suggested in this very brief series of examples, the issues raised at this productive nexus call out for a reading that is simultaneously historical and red, ecological and feminist, critical and resistant, dialectical and materialist. *CNS* readers are particularly well-equipped to participate in forging such a conversation.