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AESTHETICS AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

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Aesthetics and environmentalism allude to discursive processes as the polar ice sheets which melt at an alarming rate. **I do not attempt to define postmodernism as environmentalism as a hinge which requires a need for a transformative social idea,** drawing on Herbert Marcuse's idea that a social transformation is the emergence of a new aesthetic. I ask how culture may contribute to its transformation. I follow Marcuse's interest in environmental aesthetics and recognises the activist aspect of environmentalism (as opposed to a reformism seeking environmental protection within liberal society). I ask if there is a difference in art to that of environmentalism; and if so, what is the distancing effect of claims for art's autonomy in environmental aesthetics. **If so, an aspect of postmodernism is the negotiation of a tension between art's autonomy and environmental engagement.**

POSTMODERNITY

Richard Dyer gives a history of the word culture in *Heavenly Bodies*. He traces its origin to a verb for cultivation, which is then used in a noun form by the metaphor of cultivating a mind to which articulates the taste of an elite, or art, or a way of life - from Johann Gottfried von Herder, *the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (London: Routledge, 1969: 179-224) and counter a model of Culture now means the arts, and this is the case in Kant. Yet, since Kant, culture as the arts has had a claim to universal benefit, for which the foil is utility, or the good - culture as a set of practices indicating the taste of a group. The divergent meanings of culture are explored in *The Artist as Subject* (London: Routledge, 2004). Artists, from the 1960s, engaged in social observation, worked in community settings, addressed public issues, and rejected the Modernist art object. For some, the art object is a social-based tactic, called by art historian Grant Kester (Kester, 2004). In dialectics, the articulation

active: individuals and groups are conditioned in which they live and intervene to change those conditions which in turn require. This aligns with a sense of hope for a run through Marxism and the optimism of feminism. The outcomes of the inter- and post-consensus that a new society can be produced did not deliver it, and include the tower-blocks crises. But this failure redirects attention less to content of the dream than to the assumptions on which it was based, and to a tension between the implicit desire to maintain the status of the producers.

as an idea that artists had a privileged voice as able to plumb psychic depths unavailable to others (Kuspit, 1993). This is ruptured by Joseph Beuys' idea that everyone is an artist - which I take to mean that a society has a capacity to imagine the range of possibility. Something may be understood as a difference between environmental protection and feminism as transformative awareness. I return to this. First, I turn to Catherine Belsey's definition of *Structuralism: a Very Short Introduction*:

Culture constitutes the vocabulary within which we do what we do; it specifies the meanings we set out to inhabit and repudiate, the values we make efforts to live by or protest against, and the protest is also cultural. Culture resides ... in the representations of the world exchanged, negotiated and ... contested in a society. (Belsey, 2002: 7).

Conditions are historically specific. As Belsey notes, **protest is cultural as well as its target.** In the **catalogue of an exhibition, *Natural Reality*** notes that the landscapes produced in industrialism are different from those of earlier societies but argues that the landscape was framed by human activity, as seen in landscape painting: "meadows kept free of sheep, woods used in the forestry sense, artificial fish ponds or flocks minded by shepherds ... villages, castles and mills." (Sieferle, 1999: 149). This is a dialectic confrontation of natural and cultural landscapes, subjected to a critique essentially aimed at the natural character of the traditional landscape to which it is opposed. This **raises issues** for conservation, and also the disintegration of concepts such as **the real which lies behind the surface, the skin of what is produced - or, it might be said, the tension, autonomy.**

Similarly outmoded by complexity theory - which has many elements which interact in non-linear ways - Cilliers gives the example of verbal language transformed by the way in which it is used "so that the use of a word ... can cause that term either to

field ... or to expand it. The use of the term
meaning of the term itself." (Cilliers, 1998:
aesthetic autonomy makes no sense, then,
ically as following from an idea of
n.

ia, the proscenium stage is setting for
as if possessing coherent identities, acting
f their own devising or free choice (Belsey,
ires in Brecht's alienation and Beckett's
, 1997: 25-33), just as autonomy fractures
ern world of contingency. But is this the case
s attention to environmental questions? To
e artist's voice still privileged, or the art work
aesthetic value to what is at root a political

IRONMENT

ce to offer a history of environmental art but
of its forms to draw parallels between these,
onmental issues, and the knowledges implicit
ooks back to land art in the 1970s, and cites
ects in which artists sought practical ways to
of culture and nature. Kester summarises:

**While some artists ... viewed the land as a larger
canvas, of interest primarily for its cultural and
historical associations or for the formal
properties of scale and material opened up by the
natural environment, others began to approach
the natural world as a complex gestalt of
biological, political, economic and cultural forces.
(Grant Kester, catalogue for *Groundworks*, 2005,
p. 21).**

ly at art which responds implicitly to the
explicitly to environmental agendas,

llowing categories:

**ch represents the natural world;
which enters a discourse of the natural
prehension;
al production which tests methods of
salvage or contributes to sustainable**

liologic inter-action at the cusp of art and

epresentation is a sculpture of three life
om a list of endangered species, carved in
e for European Year of the Environment
andall-Page. Seen on Dartmoor, at more than
each case, they have a monumental quality
r vulnerability - things easily trodden
e figures of workers depicted in Realist
lent the status of that which it is appropriate
as early ethnography granted the status of

being appropriate to academic study to non-white cultures. The work's aspiration is undermined, however, by its history: commissioned for a site outside a new supermarket on a greenfield site in Basingstoke it masked the environmental damage of the development; then, surrounded by rubber mats, the sculptures became play-forms for children, at which point the artist sought - I do not know with what success - a new buyer for the work.

An example of discursive art is Kate Salway's series of composed photographs of natural history specimens, with reference to the cabinets of curiosity (*Wunderkammer*) in which things were kept for study and amusement, leading to the categorisation of species, and display of collections of once-living creatures - insects, butterflies, fish, shells - in cabinets and frames. The attitude which analyses, divides, and categorises these life forms is that which denies them life, literally when the specimen is killed to be re-presented in a frame. Salway's point is that this is a destructive form of apprehension likely to lead to further denigrations of non-human species. Again, a parallel with early ethnography occurs, as bringing material into the respectability of academic study while depriving it of intrinsic validity as well as vitality.

An example of art as salvage is Mel Chin's *Revival Field*, in which plants naturally take up toxins such as cadmium from polluted land. Chin aimed to pilot this organic technology of waste management, at the Pig's Eye landfill site in St Paul-Minneapolis in 1989-91, and later at sites in the Netherlands and Germany, so that it can be freely taken up by others; and saw the work as a symbolic representation of an affluent society's repression of its excess wastefulness. In another way, the studio-house by Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till in north London using straw-bales, rubble from the site, and other low-cost and low-energy materials, pilots a material response to sustainability and challenges the conventional split of professional and domestic spaces. As well as these elements of visual culture are the many experiments in alternative ways of living, in eco-villages and permaculture settlements around the world.

An example of interventionism is the work of PLATFORM in London, as in guided walks through London's financial district to draw attention to its intertwined histories of colonialism and capital accumulation. PLATFORM invites individuals from contrasting backgrounds to these events, which may last up to ten hours. They see intimate encounters of this kind as more likely than appeals to a mass public to shift the consciousness of those participating - though they have used tactics including the distribution of spoof newspapers to London commuters to, as they put it, insert ideas in the social bloodstream. Jane Trowell, a core member of PLATFORM, and Chin use the term viral to describe their art. Perhaps art gives a critical distance; or offers a position outside the arena of conventional - representational - politics. The context is a breakdown of such politics as people react to environmental policy with a cynicism nearing that which met leaflets advising them to hide under the

the event of nuclear war, and its replacement
of new coalitions and single-issue
as Papastergiadis sums up:

In face of urgent responses to either ecological needs
or the growing force of global corporatism, neither
socialism nor liberalism is seen as offering solid
foundations for critical responses. ... In the absence of
a formal expression of political alternatives there is an
increase in the number of informal movements which
have clustered around the critical issues of social
justice, cultural identity and ecological defence.
(Papastergiadis, 2006: 21).

CULTURE

ow attracts media attention. Beside
ers such as the hurricane which destroyed
05 are persistent signs of disruption of the
produced by a rapid increase in carbon and
gas emissions. It is accepted that this is the
it requires a radical revision of the lifestyle
affluent society. Bill McKibben, author of *The
ites,*

... if the scientists are right, we're living through the
biggest thing that's happened since human civilization
emerged. One species, ours, has by itself in the course
of a couple of generations managed to powerfully raise
the temperature of an entire planet But oddly,
though we know about it, we don't know about it ... it
isn't part of our culture. Where are the books? The
poems? The plays? (Bill McKibben, Open Democracy
website: 'Can You Imagine? A Warming World Needs
Art' 22nd April, 2005.

ks, such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and
Power Politics (2001). But McKibben's possibly
n hides an assumption that it is down to
l with the looming environmental crisis. It is
s-governmental initiatives such as Kyoto are
at national policy has limited scope in a period
ation; it is also the case that global industries
s an extractive resource to be processed into
- while green consumption grows through
box schemes, low-energy light bulbs are
d to recycle at least some domestic waste is
it if dealing with climate change is out-
ners and citizens, this ignores the alliance of
at trans-national and global levels which is
s usual - so that oil companies use new,
ologies as fig leafs for extraction. I do not
tion, but if there is to be a revision of the
the affluent society this requires a shift of
the part of individuals within a complex set of
s.

lels between efforts to raise environmental
e modes of cultural production outlined in the

previous section. Both can be read in terms of the kinds of knowledge produced, drawing on Andrew Jamison's rehearsal of Bronislaw Szerszynski's four pieties, as Szerszynski puts it, within environmentalism (Jamison, 2001: 149-151). These are: a monastic piety of counter-cultural modes of dwelling; a sectarian piety of activism; a churchly piety of campaigning organisations; and a folk piety of green consumerism. The monastic piety is characteristic of counter-cultural groups who develop alternative ways of living, often in collective and collaborative modes. It is principled rather than purposive in that it enacts a value system rather than seeking to promote a shift in policy in structures external to the piety such as the state. Cases include eco-village living and permaculture sites. A parallel in cultural production is the tendency to group and collaborative practice characteristic of politicised artists' groups today, and what Kester (2004) calls dialogic art. The sectarian piety is that of direct action, again involving groups and coalitions but aimed at impacting policy - but I would say at interrupting the maintenance of a social order serving capital. I disagree with Szerszynski's view that direct action is purposive rather than principled, but when he writes that, "the 'community of saints' in one of the small direct action groups such as the Dongas or Earth First! is experienced by each of its members in the form of face-to-face affectual relationship" (Szerszynski, 1997: 45), he states a crucial point about activism - that it takes place among those present. The churchly piety, next, is purposive, seeking to change the policies of governments and behaviour of commercial interests through pressure groups and campaigns enabling members of a mass public to participate at arm's length in radical causes. Greenpeace is a radical example, and the Worldwide Fund for Nature a liberal one. To join such a campaign is to enjoy a passive identity of dissent. When art is used to meet the imaginative deficit of scientific data on climate change, as in the *Cape Farewell* project - in which artists and writers accompanied scientists to the Arctic ice, producing work for a subsequent exhibition on climate change at the Natural History Museum, London, and for a programme, *Climate Change: Cultural Change* in Newcastle-Gateshead in June, 2006 - it is aligned with. The folk piety is principled in offering participants, equally within mainstream society, a sense of belonging to another or incipient society based on green values. Organic vegetable box schemes are a key case here, I suggest, when the emotive value of the box is not only based on the material contents but also grounded in a feeling of belonging to an invisible but present network. Other areas cited by Jamison include waste recycling and energy conservation. A parallel in art is work representing the natural world.

CONSCIOUSNESS

When Marcuse spoke at the Dialectics of Liberation Congress in London in July, 1967, he alluded to society as a work of art: a trope for a libidinal society, and the end of a discrete category of art as aesthetic production, along the lines proposed coincidentally by Beuys. It is a millenarian vision, which

esent. The transformation is in the act of
e means are the end, always unfinished. This
that a critical environmental cultural practice
a potentially creative or destructive tension
s of cultural work (as use of language) and
resence (in its extreme beyond language),
ogical. But words do not stop ice melting.
of the difficulty but has no answer. He
estion from the floor after his lecture, 'The End
ree University, Berlin (1970: 62-82),

You have identified what is unfortunately the greatest
difficulty ... for new, revolutionary needs to develop,
the mechanisms that reproduce the old needs must be
abolished. In order for the mechanisms to be
abolished, there must first be a need to abolish them.
That is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not
know how to get out of it. (Marcuse, 1970: 80).

κ in later writing on the role of an
ch is parallel to an idea that art makes up the
t of science, or offers utopian glimpses.
but neither are revolutionary either. Both can
d to the strategies of containment of liberal
t threaten the more violent strategies of neo-
nay indeed make social organisation as a
table by adding notes of concern for the
mbellishment.

**orative art practices, the tension
l everyday life is exposed. Kester writes
hich he sees,**

**an understanding that the issues of representation
and material production that so preoccupied previous
generations of artists have given way to engagement
with modes of exchange, collective action, and what
Nicolas Bourriaud calls 'the sphere of interhuman
relations'. (Kester, 2005: 31, citing Bourriaud, 2002:
28)**

**t these practices do not transcend
es but indicate a widening of art's field.
urther expansion of the field expanded in
lude art earthworks (Krauss, 1983). But
ous expansion was a modification
nt cultural fields such as architecture and
pears now, in its environmentalist forms,
n activism, environmental debate,
science and ecology, and single-issue
than read these as boundaries I see
lation points for intersecting axis-lines.
at the gap between them is "a
which the quotidian is held in an
ension with the aesthetic." (Kester,
ps the exit from Marcuse's difficulty is
ilarly unresolved suspension between the
d the everyday life in which, for Henri
ts of presence occur spontaneously (Shields,**

1999: 58-64). Hence, the new does not require production because it is already here, but requires only recognition (Miles, 2004: 70-92).

To conclude, if the prerequisite for an effective response to the looming disaster of climate change is a new consciousness, and end to environmental and social injustice, exploitation, and destructiveness, how is this to emerge? Through art which represents environments and environmental issues, or which discursively deals with the values and underlying assumptions of attitudes to the environment, or which pilots technologies for salvage and sustainability. or which verges on activism as a transformational act? All have limits and I have brought myself to the edge of saying that art is a decoration of discomfort. Yet **it is possible that critical interventions in culture, as the vocabulary within which we act, are acts in which the values of an alternative world are expressed and shaped.** This suggests an aesthetic, departing from the autonomy of Modernism, from the disinterested judgement of Kant as well, of interested and critical but not judgemental interventions in discourses and realities; in which the creative imagination remains in an always unresolved and active tension with everyday life. Marcuse writes, "Liberation in nature is the recovery of the life-enhancing forces in nature, the sensuous aesthetic qualities which are foreign to a life wasted in unending competitive performances" (Marcuse, 1972: 60). He saw this as integral to liberation in human consciousness (through which we see nature and frame it as idea).

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