

The Ecology of Art or Art as Ecology

Gavin Malone

Broadsheet. Contemporary Visual Arts and Culture, Volume 27, No 4, 1998
Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia

I'm an artist. It took me a long time to be able to say that comfortably. I felt I was being pretentious and I was still trying to work out what being an artist means. I'm also a father of two sons, a son to my father, my mother is dead. A sibling to four brothers and two sisters, a first cousin to nineteen on my father's side and nine on my mother's, an uncle to twelve, a friend to many and a curiosity to some. These relationships inform and enrich my existence, they are part of my humanity, my ecology.

As importantl, my existence is underpinned by my and humanity's relationship to the biosphere which supports life; the land, the sea, the air. We ascribe all sorts of meaning to this bio physical stuff, ranging from the romantic to the resource. Many call it 'nature', I avoid using this word, it is ill defined. We are part of, not separate from the bio physical world on and in which we live, the nature/culture binary is no longer appropriate. The relationships between organisms and their environment, between us as living organisms, water and carbon ensouled with a spirit, are too complex to allow binary simplicity.

The geology of place, the rocks, the soil, the water. Not only do we utilise them but we construct meaning from myth to money. Imagine Adelaide without the Mt Lofy Ranges, Colonel Light would never have placed the colony here without the water from the hills. He had the ability to read and understand topography, physical and cultural. So many of the significant features of Adelaide held meaning for the Kaurna people, the River Torrens or Karrawirraparri 'the red gum forest river' in the Kaurna language, enabled settlement. We took so much from the Kaurna people.

I'm speaking awkwardly of an ecology of being, the whole damn shebang from black holes to ant tracks and ponder as to where art fits in? Art expresses what it is to be human, how we relate, understand, explore and create. What then is the relationship of art to the bio physical world, do we just paint it, use its resources or do we nurture and respect it? What is the cultural ecology of art? There is lot of stuff that is 'cool' art that is presented as visual research, personal expression, exploring visual parameters but a lot of it is self-consuming as well as resource consuming. While we have created arbitrary systems of economic exchange and value, all resources come from harvesting, cultivating or extracting the bio-sphere's resources. Economic systems and money are not abstract, they are based on physical matter, a dollar is really a dew drop. The return that art provides to the social capital, a civil society, is part of the equation.

What then is the place of art in ensuring our continued and equitable existence, which is humanity's great challenge. Robert Theobold, the US based economist and futurist, proposes the 21st century as 'the healing century' as compared to the economic and technological paradigms of the 20th century. I've wrestled with this for a while as we re-evaluate relationships and it has helped me to put it into words, developing a personal understanding - 'art as bio spheric didaction'. Sounds like cultural clap trap but it's my personal way of understanding what I do when it doesn't fit into the dominant theories of art. Bio – life; biosphere - that part of the Earth's surface that supports life; sphere - circular not linear; didactic - meant to educate, to instruct; action - that something happens, there is an outcome.

Part of my work relates to conciliation between people and people, and people and the land. It is easy to consider the sculptural form to be a river valley, paint strokes to be the planting of trees, shrubs and grasses, the grubbing of fennel and poisoning of blackberry to be the editing of superfluous content. But bring in also others, collaboration with engineers, architects, urban planners, landscape planners, those who influence the form of our public space and infrastructure. Then another layer of ecologists, botanists, cultural planners and importantly artists. People who can see across borders and disciplines, who ask the silly questions, who articulate a vision, who forge new bonds.

Art is personal, public and political expression, cultural mediation, the manipulation of matter, the ascribing of an aesthetic. To manipulate an urban, rural or remote landscape, to change its aesthetic from degraded to sustainable, to mediate and act on the way people understand and live in the bio physical world can be and is art.

How does this relate to the contemporary art institutions which are the facilitators, coordinators, the arbiters. A personal view is that much art has been too insular, too exclusive and to 'cool'. Where is the warmth of being human, where is the stuff that contributes to ecological sustainability that not only takes art out of the cube but forms new layers and weaving of meaning? This is an issue and challenge we all face as artists and community. The cultural dialogue can and must include the esoteric but what about more room for the 'big room', the space beyond the cube or the latest visual technology and tricks. I can't offer answers, we all have our ways of seeing the world, things come and things go. We can however think, challenge ourselves and each other to forge new understandings, processes and outcomes. Modernism brought us the freedom to explore and express, post modernism merges and deflates, art as ecology can assist us develop intimacy with our place and to seek sustainable realms for another century of human endeavour.