

## **On The Role of the Ecological Artist**

by Julian H. Scaff

*"My dialogue wasn't with other art. It was always with something else out in the world."  
- Patricia Johanson <sup>1</sup>*

When people ask about my ecological art, I find myself having trouble defining it within an existing paradigm that is comprehensible to the lay-person. "Is it like landscape architecture?" they ask. Sort of, but not really. "Is it making garden sculptures?" No, not really, but it could. "Is it landscaping?" Not in the traditional sense of a gardening service, but yes it might include landscaping. It's approaching the landscape as a medium for aesthetic expression with an ecological ethic towards sustainability, I might try to explain. Blank stares. The truth is that this sort of work does not fit the traditional paradigms of an artist, nor a landscape architect, nor a spacial planner, nor a restoration ecologist, yet it entails aspects of all these professions.

One of the defining characteristics of many environmental or ecological artists working today is the inherent interdisciplinary nature of their work. This was apparent at a recent symposium on the 5th of June, 2007 at the Technical University, Delft, the Netherlands, titled "Art and Ecology." Presenters included Dutch environmental artists Jeroen van Westen and Ton Matton, and American environmental artist Patricia Johanson. Although all three employ different methods and approaches, and manifest formally disparate artworks, all share a philosophy of combining art and ecology as well as a strongly interdisciplinary approach. I had the opportunity to sit in on a workshop given by Jeroen van Westen in which professionals such as artists, landscape architects, architects, and civil engineers had to opportunity to work in a very open, collaborative environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelley, Caffyn. Art and Survival: Patricia Johanson's Environmental Projects. p. 158.

The parameters of van Westen's workshop, titled "Kunst en Ecologie" (art and ecology) were intentionally broad and designed to get groups thinking from more panoptic concepts to specific solutions. Van Westen asked participants very simply, what are the conceptual elements of a (Dutch) city? Such elements include both public and private spaces, transportation (roads, motorways, trains, etc.), houses, apartments, and commercial buildings and skyscrapers. In the Dutch context, waterways (rivers and canals) are also prevalent. How can these elements be reconceptualized both ecologically and aesthetically?

Van Westen describes aesthetics in this context as a balance between the senses and ethics. By the senses he means how one senses the environment with sight, smell, touch, and hearing. By ethics he means the choices that are made in how we reconcile the memory of the past (history) with the invention of the new and anticipation of the future. One approach is "tabula rasa," wiping the slate clean, starting new and embracing progress as the starting point. Another is the "palimpsest" approach of using memory as the part of something new, and repurposing the old into progress. Yet a third approach is "terra incognita" in which past, present and future are integrated seamlessly into an unknown landscape yet to be discovered. Given this conceptual framework, how would the groups reconceptualize elements of the city, or the city as a whole?

Four groups were formed of four to six participants per group, and care was given to ensure that each group included at least one artist, landscape architect, architect, and ecologist.

The first group titled their results "From Grey to Green" and focused on what they termed green infrastructures. They observed that nature can scare many people (especially city-dwellers) is there is not a safe cultural interface. The Netherlands is distinct from many

other countries in that there is no wild nature. The landscapes of the Netherlands are all culturally (re)imagined. That said, there is nature in the Netherlands, even if it is managed, and there are many important non-human habitats that overlap with human habitats. This group was particularly interested in how landscapes in the city can be multifunctional and serve an ecological function. One way is by connecting agriculture to city dwellers in the form of public or community gardens designed specifically for growing food. Green spaces contribute to a general quality of life for urban inhabitants, and community gardens are not only good for the urban environment but also for a sense of community. But while roof-top gardens are growing more popular across Europe, the group was also interested in how vertical space could become part of the green infrastructure of the city. What comes to mind is Patrick Blanc's "Le Mur Végétal" (The Vertical Garden) whereby plants of varying species can be grown on a vertical surface without soil.

This group also became very interested in the relationship between a river and the city, and particularly in fostering the ecology of rivers within city limits. Water is, after all, the backbone of all ecology. This group worked primarily within a conceptual model of viewing the city as a living organism, and as such they were in favor of greening every possible surface, horizontal and vertical. In pursuing ideas of green infrastructure and seeking public involvement in the public greenspace, what emerged was a principle of stacking and balancing functions and aesthetics. This group, more than the others, had a designer's mentality, meaning they believed that there wasn't any problem that couldn't be overcome with good design.

The second group titled their presentation "Learn to Wonder" and the main element they were interested in was water. Amongst ideas they explored was introducing small waterways throughout the city that would connect with the river, for instance a fountain in a pub-

lic square that recirculated river water. Another was making water management within a building or house visible by putting it on the outside, turning buildings inside-out much as Richard Rogers and Enzo Piano did with their design of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Water exchange systems flowing to and from buildings would become visible, showing not only our management of this most precious resource but also becoming a new aesthetic element in the city. The group envisioned an octopus-shaped water distribution system, radiating out from the river to all parts of the city. The "tentacles" of the octopus would fill up when water levels were higher, thus creating extra storage. These should be designed to the natural contours of the land, and would also break up the straight lines of the city, highlighting the topography of the land underneath the city grid. The water sculptures and urban space projects of artist/landscape architect Herbert Dreiseitl come to mind, such as his design of a lake with water harvested from green roofs in Marlene Dietrich Platz, a public square in Berlin.

Group three, without a title for their presentation, delved into questions of scale with various elements of the city. One such element they addressed was that of a motorway bisecting and cutting apart a residential neighborhood. Can the neighborhood be reconnected by either lowering the motorway and building pedestrian bridges over it, or by raising the motorway to a sufficient height that it no longer functions as a barrier between two sections of the neighborhood? Like the previous group, this group also wanted to make water more visible, and they proposed making rain gutters transparent and building streams that delivered rain water directly back to the river (also again echoing some of Dreiseitl's work). But in spite of these specific proposals, this group was by far the most conceptual and philosophical of all the groups, and one of the primary issues they discussed at great length was how one can make concepts on a very large scale while still remaining democratic. Small scale projects like community gardens are much easier to

keep democratic because direct participation by everyone involved is feasible and any potential power structures can be kept relatively flat. But in very large scale concepts, democratic consensus becomes impractical (if not infeasible) and thus hierarchical management structures tend to be put in place. While this was in some ways troubling to the group, they perceived that a network of small-scale community-based projects could result in a cultural revolution of greening the city.

The fourth group, perhaps the most focused of all the groups, titled their concept "Bio Tower." Emulating certain aspects of Paolo Soleri's concepts of "arcology" they sought to multiply green spaces whilst minimizing the physical footprint of the city by building green spaces and water systems vertically. By layering functions and elements of the city vertically, they envisioned a multiplying of landscapes. While ecological restoration can restore a biotope along, for instance, a stretch of urban river front, this group wanted to go even further by adding new biotopes. They proposed greening walls (again, like Patrick Blanc), adding water ways (like Dreiseitl), greening bridges, and turning skyscrapers into green mountains or mesas. This last item first reminded me of the tree wells that Hundertwasser designed in his apartment buildings in Vienna, but I think their ideas are actually closer to the design philosophy of Ken Yeang and his "green skyscrapers." While Hundertwasser wanted to introduce elements of nature into his architecture, Yeang's philosophy comes closer to actually layering new biotopes onto human structures, and his vertical theory of urban design is right in line with this group's thinking.

While many of the ideas (or syntheses of ideas) generated by these groups were fascinating and valuable to general discourse about art and ecology, the most important result of this workshop was the highlighting of the important of interdisciplinary working relationships between artists, landscape architects, architects, ecologists, engineers, city plan-

ners, and so on. I am often asked "what is a landscape/ecological/environmental artist?" It's a difficult question to answer, because the profession is so interdisciplinary and it overlaps with all of the professions I list above. But this workshop answered the question, and hopefully highlighted to all the participants the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and of including ecological artists in architectural and public space projects. Ecological artists are facilitators and synthesizers; they are both conceptual artists and activists. The ecological artist can synthesize the ideas of the above professions and invent or discover the aesthetic (ethical + sensorial) framework that can transform any public works project, and indeed the city itself, into a work of (ecologically functional) art.