2. CREATIVE EXCHANGES: ENVIRONMENTAL ART AS A CATALYST FOR DIALOGUE AND CHANGE

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Abstract

For individuals and communities, the challenge of addressing a mounting global ecological crisis, understanding complex issues such as climate change and building a sustainable future can be an overwhelming one. Generating individual and collective action to facilitate change requires meaningful communication and a shared sense of values and direction, so what role can artists play in such processes? Creative practitioners possess astute communication and innovative thinking skills which can be applied to the dissemination of environmental information in imaginative ways. Additionally, artists’ capacity to elicit emotional responses, present fresh perspectives and circumvent habitual ways of seeing can stimulate behavioural changes that support sustainable living. By employing open rather than didactic forms of communication and by engendering aesthetic or challenging experiences, artists open a space of questioning between the work and the participant/viewer. Increasingly, much eco-art practice is focusing less on a singular art object and more on process, including the processes of communication that the work catalyses through audience engagement and the ‘dialogical exchange’ that it fosters. Through such participatory and dialogical practices, artists can produce works which connect people with what they value within the environment and why they might choose to enact sustainable practices. This paper explores such processes of dialogical exchange in the context of the biennial, site-specific environmental art event Floating Land which, by ‘merging arts and culture with science and the environment … aims to contribute to positive global change through education and conversations’. Examples are employed to consider, on a broader level, how artists and events such as Floating Land communicate about environmental issues and how they facilitate dialogical processes which foster reflection on environmental values and operate as catalysts for change.

Keywords: Ecological Art, environmental art, environmentalism, communications, Floating Land, dialogic exchange, art

Introduction

Globally, climate variability and change, population growth and economic development (specifically increased resource consumption and waste generation) are key drivers impacting on the environment. Together, these factors contribute to reduction in forest cover, increased extinction of plant and animal species, deteriorating ocean and reef health, and increased pollution and contestation over freshwater. Many of these matters are directly under human control but cannot be resolved solely at a local or even national level: they require collective global action (Climate Commission 2011; SOEC 2011). Generating individual and joint action to facilitate change requires awareness, meaningful communication and a shared sense of values (Adger et al. 2009). Multiple approaches and presentation modes are needed, and in this paper we consider how artists can contribute in this sphere. Compelling visual and sensory communication can be a powerful stimulus, with much evidence confirming that it can affect viewers' attitudes, emotions and even behaviour (Sheppard 2012). Additionally, long-lasting change can be fostered by 'affective responses that are personally relevant, inspiring and motivating', particularly when modes of engagement are tailored to an audience, employ social support and empower deeply held values (Sheppard 2012:36). We examine how creative practitioners and events such as Floating Land can contribute to such processes by cultivating dialogue and fresh perspectives which encourage reflection on environmental values and operate as catalysts for change.
Three key domains in which artists make valuable contributions are via creative thinking, eliciting emotional responses, and through participatory, reflective practices. These involve ‘collaborating consciously’ with an audience and, in eco-art practice, are ‘concerned with how we connect with’ each other and our environment (Gablik 1991: 158). Through such ecological and dialogical practices, artists can produce works which put people in touch with what they value within their environment. When discussion is generated around such works it can foster a sense of interconnection with the natural world and crystallize both emotional and intellectual understandings of why we might be motivated to take steps to enact sustainable practices. In other words, art can operate as a mechanism of engagement in challenging or affirming our environmental values and our commitment to acting on them. We draw on Whitmarsh et al.’s (2011:3) definition of engagement as incorporating one’s ‘personal connection with’ the environment ‘comprising cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects … In other words, engagement encompasses what people know, feel and do in relation to’ environmental concerns.

Creative perspectives

How then do artists facilitate ecological engagement? Because ‘the facts of climate change’ do not always ‘speak for themselves’, creative practitioners can apply their innovative thinking and communication skills to re-envisioning environmental issues in imaginative and often memorable ways (Abbasi 2006: 97; Whitmarsh et al. 2011). Artists can operate in trans-disciplinary contexts complementing or enhancing scientific data as in Tiffany Holmes’ (2006-2009) creative visualisation of changing energy use in an urban apartment (Holmes 2007; Holmes 2009). Importantly, creative thinking entails approaching subjects in ways that often sidestep habitual, systemic ways of thinking, doing and seeing. It involves challenging boundaries, imagining futures, invoking metaphor, constructing narratives and facilitating open-ended thinking (Gablik 1991; Wallen 2012; Weintraub 2012).

Typically, creative practice does not involve didactic forms of communication. Instead, the ambiguity, lack of fixity and fresh perspectives that characterise works of art, and artists’ capacity to engender aesthetic, provocative or challenging experiences, can open up a space of questioning and invite dialogue between the artist, the work and the participant/viewer. Such processes are further supported by eco-art practice which often shifts the emphasis from singular art objects, focusing instead on process, community engagement and activism, including the processes ‘of communication that the work catalyzes’ and the ‘dialogical exchange’ that it fosters (Gablik 1991; Krester 2004: 90). In these situations, the audience ‘is not regarded as distanced observer but as participant in the experience’, so that artists, participants, the work and the processes generated by it contribute to a broader interconnected system (Wallen 2012: 235). This differs from the monologic approach – with its emphasis on individualism and separateness – that has characterised much twentieth century modernist art. In her seminal 1991 essay, Suzi Gablik proposed a relational model of art practice or a ‘new participatory paradigm’ which reflects ecological thinking. She observed:

Whereas the struggle of modernism was to delineate self from other, [in a relational approach] the world becomes a place of interaction and connection, and things derive their being by mutual dependence. When everything is perceived as dynamically connected, art needs to collaborate with the environment and a new sense of relationship causes the old polarity between art and audience to disappear (1991: 150-1).

When this relational approach informs eco-art practice a dialogical space is created that can open up different ways of thinking and doing.

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1 In the original quote, the authors refer specifically to climate change.
While individual works can have an impact, the biennial site-specific environmental art event *Floating Land* provides a valuable locus for collective environmental engagement. By ‘merging arts and culture with science and the environment’, it ‘aims to contribute to positive global change through education and conversations’ (Sunshine Coast Council 2013). Since its inception in 2001, *Floating Land* has incorporated a strong community ethos, a focus on dialogue, trans-disciplinary practice and responsiveness to place (Wilson 2006). Initially it involved creative works situated throughout the Noosa River catchment but since 2009 it has been located primarily at Lake Cootharaba at Boreen Point within the Noosa Biosphere Reserve, and has investigated themes including climate change and rising seas (2009), water culture (2011) and nature’s dialogue (2013).

Events such as *Floating Land*, are comprised of multifarious individual projects which work together to form an organic system that supports experimentation, imaginative thinking and dialogical exchange. By bringing together diverse participants and incorporating works that are participatory, collaborative, time and process-based, multiple spaces are generated for reflective conversations and even setting aside habitual roles and perspectives around critical issues. When eco-art practices generate a sense of the inter-relationship of life processes this can connect people with what they value in a specific place, or the broader environment, and support contemplation on how one might take actions to sustain it. Although it is difficult to demonstrate that art’s capacity to be inspirational, to present matters from fresh perspectives and to generate dialogue, can directly activate behavioural changes that support sustainable living (Weintraub 2012: xiii; Curtis 2009), our ongoing research project Visualising the Environment is examining these questions from qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

**Catalysts for change**

Behaviour change theory suggests that eco-art’s facilitation of engaging experiences in and about the environment can contribute to pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) and behaviour change. Eco-art’s capacity for evoking a space of questioning and generating reflection on environmental values, offers opportunities for social learning, influencing personal norms and questioning habitual routines. Personal norms are developed through social conversations where individuals hone their values and sense of responsibility by watching and interacting with others (Jackson 2005). In environmental communities, such as *Floating Land*, adults and children experience others acting with environmental concern and responsibility and choose whether to integrate these values into their set of personal norms. Additionally, participants can engage with cross-cultural perspectives, including indigenous knowledge systems, which can enrich understandings of how environmental stewardship is enacted.

Social learning is a process of ‘iterative reflection that occurs when we share our experiences, ideas and environments with others' (Keen et al 2005:9). From a social learning perspective, to affect underlying values, ‘triple loop learning’ is required. This type of learning entails questioning, reflexivity and awareness of learning as a process. The deeper understanding that ensues supports shifts in values and norms that underpin existing assumptions and actions (Keen et al. 2005). Behaviour change can also occur when dialogues generated by eco-art practices stimulate critical reflection on personal environmental beliefs and behaviours, and this generates a move from routine or automatic behaviours to post-conscious or reflective behaviours whereby people think before they act (Heimlich & Ardoin 2008; Spaargaren & Van Vliet 2000). Engaging communities in collaborative learning experiences, approaching issues from imaginative perspectives and fostering reflective awareness of the interconnection between ourselves and our environment can create a fertile context for triple loop learning and facilitating pro-environmental behaviour.

**Dialogical processes in practice**

*Ghostnets* (2011), *Oceans of Air* (2011) and *At the Water’s Edge* (2009) are examples of some of the numerous participatory *Floating Land* projects that have fostered dynamic interactions, reflective dialogue and social learning (Gablik 1991: 163). *Ghostnets* (2011) represented an imaginative,
collaborative response to a widespread environmental problem. When lost and discarded fishing nets are carried by currents they entangle marine life and wash ashore as refuse. In remote northern Australia, disposal of such beach rubbish 'has placed an enormous burden on local refuse systems (mostly landfills)'. Consequently, GhostNets Australia was formed to involve indigenous communities in weaving and fibre workshops, resulting in the transformation of discarded nets into innovative sculptural works. These operate as aesthetic, awareness-raising, and emotionally engaging tools as they visually connect with a larger project of research, net removal, and the recovery of trapped marine turtles (Ghostnets 2013). At Floating Land 2011, artists Sue Ryan (Cairns), Marion Gaemers (Townsville), Angela Torenbeek and Flora Jo Taylor (Moa Island, Torres Strait) were able to generate community conversations around these issues through an exhibition, workshops and community installation. The latter approaches in particular, were collaborative and process-based, allowing participants to take time to engage with these issues and weave in their own responses through reflective discussions and the resulting sculptural forms.

Oceans of Air (2011), was a collaboration between Spanish climate change scientist Ramon Guardans and Australian robotics artist Kirsty Boyle. The project comprised workshops and installations that brought attention to the science of air pollution monitoring. The artists and workshop participants worked together to develop creative methods for capturing air-quality data, and subsequently launched a large, clear weather balloon above Lake Cootharaba. Besides data, video footage was collected from high above the lake, which then contributed to an aesthetically and emotionally engaging night-time light installation. While the workshops reflected on the serious effects of air pollution, the balloon became an object of curiosity which generated conversations amongst festival visitors. For example, it drew the enthusiastic attention of a school group who were scheduled for a different workshop. Their fascination for the inflated sphere floating above the silent lake resulted in a spontaneous discussion centring on environmental science, with an international expert.

In 2009, researchers Claudia Baldwin and Lisa Chandler responded to the theme of climate change and rising seas, by conducting a photovoice workshop entitled At the Water’s Edge. This project engaged three separate groups – participating artists, festival visitors and Boreen Point residents – in taking photos which reflected what they valued in living/being at the water’s edge in critical times; what they perceived as threats; and what they valued about Floating Land as a vehicle for communicating about climate change and sustainable living. Photovoice is a collaborative, participatory process which uses photographs, and conversations generated around them, to bring shared concerns to a broader audience (Wang et al. 1998; Baker & Wang 2006; Carlson et al. 2006). Participants were asked to select nine of their photos, three representing each theme, which most effectively communicated their views. At separate focus groups, the three groups voiced their views in the context of their selected images. Within this dialogical space, shared themes emerged, resulting in the creation of a visual presentation from each group, enhanced with captions, which conveyed collective perspectives. The three groups’ visual ‘narratives’ were exhibited and presented to a wider public audience at a forum on the event’s final day, generating further conversations around shared concerns which emerged through the festival context. The presentations reflected commonalities such as the value of place and concern for the consequences of negative human environmental impacts. The visual and dialogical exchanges also drew out a reflection on and understanding of other's realities and a consideration of actions at local and broader levels (Baldwin and Chandler 2010; Chandler and Baldwin 2011).

While individually these varied projects fostered participatory processes, reflective conversations and fresh perspectives, by being presented within the context of Floating Land, enhanced dialogues and relationships were generated. A survey conducted in response to the At the Water’s Edge presentations provided feedback indicating that participants valued the event because it enabled access to different perspectives (such as meeting Tuvaluan people), the capacity for multiple forms of dialogue and communication, and the motivational and emotionally engaging projects that Floating Land event facilitates. This was expressed in respondent comments such as: ‘The diversity of perspectives, problems and solutions has given me a somewhat different angle on the issue’, and ‘a wonderful opportunity to meet, discuss and seek alternatives - with fellow residents as well as visitors of all
shades and cultures’. Feedback also indicated the event’s impact in generating change: ‘Help[ed] us decide to be more active with the cause’ and its facilitation of projects of individual relevance, expressed in the comment: ‘I’m already a convinced activist but this project has pinned down the issues to a local level’ (Baldwin and Chandler 2009). Consequently, Floating Land provides a dynamic, interconnected system for creative investigations, social learning and exploring environmental values.

Conclusion

In critical times, artists and events such as Floating Land can make important contributions in facilitating individual and community engagement with ecological concerns. Through imaginative approaches, affective stimuli, and participatory, relational practices, artists can generate reflection and dialogue amongst diverse participants that is ‘both informed by’ and informs ‘an “environmental value system”’ (Wallen 2012: 239). Such processes can highlight connection with the environment and a sense of why individuals and communities might wish to enact sustainable practices. They can function as catalysts for change, fostering shifts in thinking, seeking and doing, and supporting pro-environmental behaviour. Behaviour change comes about through a number of processes, and here we have focused briefly on eco-art’s ability to influence personal norms by social interaction, and the unsettling of habitual routines. We propose that eco-art is one approach amongst many inter-related and trans-disciplinary practices that can contribute to such change, and that further research will enhance understanding of eco-art’s role in fostering values that support sustainable living. What is clear, however, is that creative thinking and collaborative practices are valuable in stimulating different ways of seeing – providing dialogical spaces in which people can voice concerns, visualise the invisible, experience empathy, appreciate alternatives, clarify values and imaginatively shape sustainable futures.

References


