

POSSIBLE WORLDS

In the developed world terms such as 'climate change', 'peak oil', and 'sustainability' have entered general dinnertime conversation. While the undeniable eco-crisis in which we find ourselves generates anxiety, appropriate responses and changes may seem few and slight given the scope of the problems. In addition, the lack of significant and responsive change in existing systems may be easily interpreted as representative of a lack of any real need for such change.

Yet the question of how we can more sensitively and ethically meet our needs in a world that we know to be more finite and fragile than we had ever understood it to be is a critical one for human communities now and in the coming decades. The continuation of industrial practices considered standard will leave an almost unimaginable legacy of environmental devastation. While it's easy to blame the practices themselves, it is more important to understand that these practices, as well as any solutions and changes we arrive at and implement, are products of beliefs and a worldview which are also accepted as standard.

Within the Western cultural tradition we are taught that historically humankind has been in conflict with the natural world. We are told that successful

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battle with a natural, wild and uncaring non-human world is and has been our key to survival, and in the end, of our thriving. Related ideas have also been key to the way our industrial and economic systems developed. One such idea is that humans are separate from, rather than a part of, natural systems; another is that the natural world is merely matter and mechanism. As such, the world outside the human is empty of meaning other than that projected or given by humankind, and so we need have no concern for its wellbeing in and for itself. In this worldview the entire non-human world is understood as resource for the human and has no other purpose or value. Adopting this worldview sweeps away potential ethical problems arising from human choices and behaviour, as well as any need for sensitive awareness or engagement.

While at this point in time we may conceptually grasp that these ideas are problematic if not downright dangerous to our long-term wellbeing, we live our daily lives within systems created and perpetuated by way of these very ideas and worldview. We may watch with concern as corporations patent seeds and develop life-threatening technologies; witness how a frenzied search for and the increasing difficulty of extracting remaining fossil fuel deposits destroys fresh water, forests, air quality and more, yet we seem unsure as to what actions to take in response. It is unlikely we will solve the problems inherent in these systems with the kind of thinking which created and continues to support them.

Only if we change how we perceive and understand ourselves in relationship to the world and the natural systems upon which we depend will we be able to arrive at more sensitive, ethical and sustainable ways of living and acting.

If we are to achieve such a fundamental shift in worldview it is very helpful to be provided with an experience of alternatives to the ways we perceive the world, and hence to how we conceive of and arrive at possibilities for change. This is where art and artists come in.

When looking for solutions and meaningful pragmatic responses to global eco-crisis, the last place most people would think of looking is to artists and the arts, yet, as I have written elsewhere, it is artists, in their role as cultural workers, who may be ideally situated to take on what is essentially a problem of cultural beliefs and practices. While engineers and scientists work toward measuring, reporting and developing new technologies, it is artists, immersed in world and culture, who hold a valuable key to the cultural and ideological change that is required for a lasting and comprehensive revision of systems and beliefs which have become liabilities.

In the words of famed 20<sup>th</sup> century media and communications guru Marshall MacLuhan,

...the role of art is to create the means of perception by creating counterenviron-ments that open the door of perception to people otherwise numbed in a nonperceivable situation<sup>1</sup>.

The 'non-perceivable situation' in this case may be twofold. We have

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<sup>1</sup> McLuhan, H. Marshall. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: Mentor.

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a failure to perceive comprehensive longterm solutions to the crisis we find ourselves in, and most importantly, we fail to perceive the role of our cultural worldview in maintaining this crisis and the challenge to the culture at large that is presented by the consequent need to shift this worldview.

In seeking solutions to climate change, species loss, ocean carbonization and more, we are faced with not only a challenge to technology, but also a challenge of imagination, coupled with a great need to broaden our vision in ways perhaps quite alien to the systems with which have so long lived. The arts have an ability to reveal, embody and present ideas and understandings to a culture, which can eventually alter the fundamental worldview of that culture.

Artworks offer a kind of sensuous aesthetic engagement with which we are quite at home. While the form of the work itself offers one level of engagement, content of the work offers another and can deepen the experience, even in ways we do not understand or recognise at the time of experiencing them. Content can be quite subtle and non-cognitive. In other words, I don't need to know or have explained to me what an artist intended. To a very great extent all I need do is experience the work in order to gain something from it.

In Daniel Conrad's 1999 film on aesthetics, *Seducing the Guard*, Canadian writer John Gray paraphrases Freud in telling us "All visions must pass a guard at the gate to the mind before you can see them."<sup>2</sup> We each of us have a guard at the gate of our mind, of our

conscious awareness, and if something is unacceptable to this guard, if it does not meet the criteria, then the guard rejects it. Psychologists and mediators are also familiar with this 'guard', which is known to them as 'reinforcement bias', the automatic allowing of only that which fits our worldview and accepted norms [to find its way into our thinking].<sup>3</sup>

If most or all of us have a reinforcement bias regarding—or guarding—our worldview and consequent notions of the possible, then we can easily simply fail to see or comprehend possibilities and potential responses to problems which do not arise from, or readily fit into this worldview.

Since the 1970s there has been a continuum of art practices responding to the global eco-crisis. Many push the margins of what is accepted or sanctioned as art, residing "resolutely between conventional forms"<sup>4</sup> and seeking solutions to the problem of how to live more harmoniously and sustainably. Examples of such works can be found in Social Practice Art, or Social Sculpture, in contemporary sci-arts collaborations, new land art, and to some extent in public art.

Historically, most public art has consisted of political or religious monuments or, particularly throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, of large 'signature' works by individual artists placed in public spaces. Notable exceptions to this are recent large bioremedial works in land art<sup>5</sup>, and rare examples of artist-led infrastructure projects, such as the Solid Waste Management Facility at the City of Phoenix, Arizona, which was led by a team of two artists<sup>6</sup>.

The Land Art Generator Initiative (LAGI) has been of special interest to me since it is so comprehensive, touching on several important points. Most obviously, the works seek pragmatic solutions to the fossil fuel energy crisis. Yet they also embody an alternative ethos in regard to human action in the world, and demonstrate more sensitive ways of responding to our need for energy to power our lives and communities. Project teams had to not only collaborate well among disciplines, they also had to 'think different', respond to and implement a different set of values, and demonstrate how to do so comprehensively and beautifully.

The design brief was thorough, foregrounding impacts and aspects typically backgrounded, or labelled 'externalities' in development—such as ecosystem services. It asked collaborators to design works which function well and thoughtfully within existing and natural world systems, rather than acting upon the world. This distinction is important. In this model the designs, and the resulting works, must be rooted within a world that is clearly greater and more complex than the human alone, so that the works are conceived, and hence will be perceived, when built, as situating and integrating human needs and interests within a larger world. At their best, the works demonstrate that there need not be a divisive split between solutions to human needs and care for the world.

If we are seeking a new world, to find it we must be willing to sail past the edge of the map, past our existing beliefs and worldview. Perhaps the possible world we need

has been here all along, within our reach, and what we really need are explorers, visionaries and adventurers to reveal and lead the way. While projects like the LAGI and others will not immediately bring change, they demonstrate that a different world is possible, starting now.

<sup>2</sup> Gray, J. in *Seducing the Guard* (film) by D. Conrad (Moving Images Distribution, 1999). Freud, S., *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, Random House, 1938) p. 193.

<sup>3</sup>Carruthers, Beth (2010) *Call and Response—Deep Aesthetics and the Heart of the World*. A talk given at *Aesth/Ethics in Environmental Change*, Biological Station of Hiddensee, Germany, May 2010

<sup>4</sup>Heim, Wallace (2003) "Slow activism; homelands, love and the lightbulb" in *Nature Performed: Environment, Culture and Performance* Szerszynski, Heim and Waterton. London: Wiley Blackwell p. 186

<sup>5</sup>For examples see GREENMUSEUM.ORG

<sup>6</sup>The artists (Michael Singer and Linnea Glatt), working with the engineering firm of Black and Veatch, designed the facility. The artists' concepts touched all aspects of the site and buildings including road configuration, building layout, building elevation designs, structural design, material choice, and landscape. Key to their design considerations was the clarity of function at the facility and the varied experiences of visitors, administrators, and employees. The site plan and built spaces were designed for education, visual access and integration.  
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