

# Art, Sweet Art

Beth Carruthers

**Adaptive, hybrid and flexible, EcoART moves hearts, changes minds and ultimately alters behaviour.**

“**W**HAT THE WARMING world needs now,” writes author Bill McKibben in *Grist* magazine, “is art, sweet art.” Precisely because environmental problems are rooted in cultural practices and ideologies, it is artists, immersed in world and cultural practices, who are ideally situated to locate and develop effective responses. In fact, we’ve been doing it for decades. What is new, is an increasing acknowledgement of the role of art and artists in bringing about change.



*Ice Lens* (2005)

Heather Ackroyd & Dan Harvey

Artist David Buckland created *Cape Farewell* to confront and raise awareness about climate change. The project has brought leading scientists, artists and educators together for three High Arctic expeditions. Beyond opening new ways of viewing our planet, they have produced a documentary, *Art From A Changing Arctic*, and very recently, a book, *Burning Ice: Art & Climate Change*.

capefarewell.com

In 2006, I was part of a group of artists, scientists and funders brought together in Vancouver to participate in Art in Ecology – A Think Tank on Arts and Sustainability. The meeting was not so much a beginning of something as it was a recognition of something that has been taking place for some time: that there is a growing international body of collaborative art-based works and projects that directly address environmental concerns.

UNESCO commissioned a report, *Mapping the Terrain of Contemporary EcoART Practice*, in advance of the meeting, and a summary report, also entitled *Art in Ecology – A Think Tank on Arts and Sustainability*, resulted. These documents describe what EcoART is and point out its collaborative nature and grounding in place and community. They convey the diversity and significance of EcoART works and projects and the passionate commitment of those involved.

The roots of North American EcoART lie in the cultural revolution of the 1960s and '70s. In his introduction to the fourth edition of *Environmental Philosophy*, Michael Zimmerman reminds us that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, helped generate both the environmental movement in North America and environmental philosophy. At the same time, and as part of this emerging environmental consciousness, a new form of Earth and/or Land art came into being. Artists such as Helen Mayer Harrison and her husband Newton Harrison, Alan Sonfist, Joseph Beuys, and others still practicing today, began turning their attention to the relationship between people and the land.

The Harrisons, writes art historian Arlene Raven in *Two Lines of Sight and an Unexpected Connection*, "work from their aesthetics, from which originates the impulse to restore the relationship between the physical ground and the physical humans inhabiting that ground.... [They] want to create actions that not only stand beside, but work to undo the domination and manipulation of nature in the service of man-made hierarchical systems."

The ethical dimensions of feminist thought have also greatly influenced contemporary EcoART practices, as have the actions of Greenpeace, the organization that pioneered "direct action" environmentalism in the 1970s. Tellingly, many contemporary EcoARTists define their works as both direct action and intervention.

Contrary to some early forms of land and environmental art, the term EcoART is intended to be more Earth-friendly or, in Canadian art critic John Grande's terms, a more "Earth-sensitive" way of working within an environment. Much environmental and/or Land art of the 1960s and '70s involved tremendous imposition on eco-systems. For example, for Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, bulldozers moved 6650 tonnes of basalt, limestone and earth, dumping it into a lake to form a huge spiral. Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* involved



Courtesy Michael Rakowitz and Lombard-Freid Projects

**George Livingston's paraSITE shelter (1998)**

Michael Rakowitz / Cambridge/Boston, Massachusetts

Designed for homeless people, *paraSITE* shelters inflate by absorbing air from exterior ventilation systems of urban buildings, providing portable refuge for their users. Michael Rakowitz sees his work as a "necessary disturbance or jolt in everyday experience that will maybe slowly change our relationship to a crisis or a problem." Rakowitz has won a number of awards including the 2003 Dena Foundation Award and the 2002 Design 21 Grand Prix by UNESCO.



**The Nest (1999)**

Claire Bedat / Vancouver, BC

The Songbird Project (1998-2002) aimed to make Vancouver a songbird-friendly model community for other North American cities. The public was introduced to ways of encouraging bird populations; they were taught how to build feeders, nesting boxes and how to create home environments for songbirds. On a grassy knoll by a downtown Vancouver community centre, Claire Bedat (with an invitation to the public to participate) constructed *The Nest* by weaving willows and waste garden cuttings. Despite protests of neighbours in high-end condos and a scandalized Parks Board, children and animals loved it.



Photo by Peter Richards

**Wind Riders (2002)**

Peter Richards with Sue Richards / Richland, Washington

Located by the Columbia River on the Washington State University grounds, *Wind Riders* is a rest stop for cyclists, joggers and walkers. In addition to the signature bicycle wind vanes, the installation includes a bronze drinking fountain in the form of a wooden barrel, park benches and a garden of native plants. With an enthusiasm for nature and the elements, Peter Richards' public art brings such phenomena as wind and tidal movement into a larger cultural context.

blasting 244,800 tonnes of earth and rock so the land itself was formed into a sculpture. A significant difference between these early works and contemporary EcoART is that EcoARTists are not working *in* or *about*, but *with*, in a collaborative, caring and dialogic sense, the natural systems and non-human constituents of a place.

Contemporary EcoART practices, as compared to environmental or Land art, strive for balance in human/world relations and are often remedial in nature, frequently working to recover habitats damaged by industrial practices. As well as direct actions and interventions with land and waters, EcoART practices tackle dangerous ideologies. They are adaptive, hybrid and flexible, informed by fields of knowledge as diverse as the natural sciences, landscape architecture and engineering. Local understanding and a reawakened appreciation for the agency and ecological significance of such non-human elements as birds, fish, forests and watersheds help bring the work into focus.

Examples of the diversity of EcoART practice are *The Living Water Garden* in Chengdu, China, designed by artist Betsy Damon in collaboration with a team of scientists, engineers and the local community. Damon's 2.4-hectare wetland and flow-form "garden" clean 250 cubic metres of polluted river water daily. Oliver Lowenstein's *Cycle Station Project* provides overnight

resting places for bicycle commuters, the *Islands in the Salish Sea* community mapping project of Canada's Gulf Islands spotlights fragile coastal ecology, and Vancouver's *SongBird* project focused on interspecies community and urban habitat.

Very local and grassroots, EcoART works involve community gardens such as the two-hectare Strathcona Community Garden in Vancouver, now official, but originally a dump site reclaimed by the local community. In a similar project, artist Carmen Rosen led a neighbourhood group in the reclamation of Still Creek in Vancouver.

To get a quick idea of the scope and variety of these works, compare them with that of David Buckland's *Cape Farewell*. It is a high profile international project that brought together artists and scientists on a journey to the North Atlantic to spread climate change awareness through education and the arts.

While forms may differ greatly, there are four modes of engagement central to all EcoART works: collaboration, community, conversation and education. In all cases, they focus on learning – learning about habitats, ecosystems and how to dwell sensitively in the world. This learning results from conversations that take place inside the work, in the collaborative making of the work, as interchanges with the work itself and within the community. Collaboration involves conversation. It

builds and affirms community as we learn skills and gain knowledge through direct and indirect means.

## Community

EcoART is grounded in a very real place and in relations with and among beings in that place. In other words, art arises from community. One can say that communities are groups of similarly minded people that grow spontaneously from shared interests and experiences. Communities are also groups of people and other beings who live and interact together.

An ecologist is interested in biotic communities, defined as “[a]n aggregation of different species of organisms living and interacting within the same habitat.” In *Perception of the Environment*, anthropologist Tim Ingold tells us that “relations among humans, which we are accustomed to calling ‘social,’ are but a sub-set of ecological relations.” Communities are webs. They are ecologies of relationships. It is hardly surprising then that EcoART works seeking to heal and nurture ecological relations arise primarily from these sub-sets of ecological relations that we call community.

Gary Paul Nabhan is a conservation biologist. In the preface to his book *Cultures of Habitat*, he observes that there is a correlation between the stability and health of non-human species in a region and the stability of the human population in those regions. He writes, “Where human populations had stayed in the same place for the greatest duration, fewer plants and animals had become endangered species; in parts of the country where massive in-migrations and exoduses were taking place, more had become endangered.” Though Nabhan is speaking about the continental US, his observations can easily be extended to Canada, and indeed, to any country experiencing rapid changes in human population. Rather than a criticism of the movement of human populations, his observations highlight the importance of sense of place on the overall health of ecosystems.

## Collaboration

Collaboration means working together with one or more people to achieve something. And while both necessary and desired, it is not always easy. Collaboration is a kind of organic process that can be unpredictable. For it to have a chance of success, differences must be respected. Collaboration among very diverse groups within an ecosystem community can be fraught with tension and difficulty. There is also well-founded concern on the part of artists that their role in arts/science collaborations may be underplayed and/or devalued. Artists everywhere, but particularly in North America, are generally undervalued as participants in arts/science collaborations. This shows up as a lack of support for artist-initiated works. And work that is obviously community-based is particularly undervalued. These works only come to fruition due to the dedication and tenacity of people acting primarily out of a

passionate love of home.

In a world that should by rights feel intimately interconnected, if only by virtue of the fact that the effects of climate change are global as well as local, people can still be remarkably narrow-minded. On one hand, this signifies our attachment to specific places. On the other, such narrow focus can be dangerous. Artists, who deal in visions, can broaden this focus so that the local is seen in perspective as nested and interdependent within a matrix of world ecosystems.

Given the remarkable ability of EcoART practitioners to realize works under difficult conditions and the efficacy of the works themselves, one would think that funders would be knocking down doors to support these projects – not so. Fortunately, there are glimmers of hope. But so far they are shining from places other than North America. The UK increasingly supports EcoART, or sci-art collaborative works, and Betsy Damon found the Chinese government encourages effective bioremedial EcoART works.

The English EcoARTist and academic David Haley blames the lack of acceptance and support for these practices, in part, on an inward gazing, object-commodity producing “art world” that does not, and has not, taken these practices seriously, even though they are not new, as evidenced by the works of the Harrisons and Joseph Beuys, for example.

Despite the challenges, it is helpful to remember that the best work has historically taken place at the margins, on the fringe. Moreover, everything cycles. The margins move towards the centre, and the system, like all things involving organic beings, is far from static. What we want is not a backward cycling, but a movement forward.

EcoART as a genre, as a movement, is particularly exciting. In its diversity and fluidity, it is constantly adapting and responsive. It is both international and local, grassroots and professional. It has been around for almost half a century and yet is always new, vital and engaged. EcoART works are designed to make a difference for the better in the world, and they do; they have distinct functions. They challenge entrenched ideas and practices that no longer work for the health of ecosystems and communities – or for the planet in general. They propose changes and demonstrate how these changes are effective. They move hearts and change minds, and, ultimately, they can change beliefs and behaviours. What the world really does need now is art, sweet art. 🎨

*Beth Carruthers is an artist, activist and philosopher whose work focuses on ethics, ecology and creative practices.*

For profiles of environmental artists and links to events and conferences around the world: [www.greenmuseum.org](http://www.greenmuseum.org)

For discussion of community art, links to organizations and inspirational how-to lists: [www.creativecommunities.ca](http://www.creativecommunities.ca)