Catalytic Aesthetics

As a practicing environmental artist I am interested in form, content, poetics and symbols. I am also interested in the concepts and theories that inform my practice. These are very general ideas that could be said of or by any artist working today, these are commonalities that many of us share with our colleagues through out the art and design professions. What makes environmental and ecological artists different than our colleagues who prefer their title in a pure form, without the adulterating influence of an adjective?

When I think about ecological and environmental art practice the point of differentiation is not the use of natural forms and content, nor eco-poetics, metaphor and symbololgy. The difference is revealed through a desire to bring about change in the world. Typically this takes the form of material practices and conceptual practices that seek to redefine and change dominant nature-culture relationships. This desire for change is a focal point in ecological and environmental practice that is widely misunderstood and as a result both under theorized and ignored by curatorial and critical practitioners as well as the institutions they work within.

On the following pages I will provide an overview of shifts in aesthetic thinking that I have found relevant to the expanding discourse about art practices that seek to affect change in the world. I will begin with a very brief argument that claims that all of us seek to initiate change despite the fact that we work from a diverse set of intentions, practices and outcomes. I will then begin to examine aesthetic philosophy and the ideas that are emerging that I believe have enormous potential to inform our making and at the same time provide us with an invaluable means to reflect upon the methods and impacts of our practices. I have limited this paper to specific ideas in environmental, and inter-personal aesthetics.
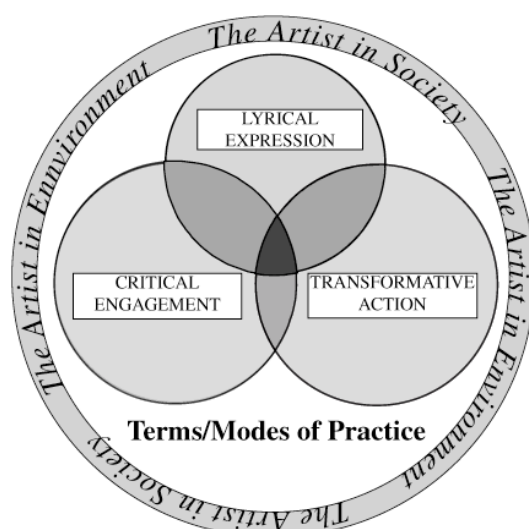
 I will conclude with some thoughts from the 3 Rivers 2nd Nature project, directed by myself and my partner Reiko Goto. It took place in Pittsburgh PA, from 2000-2006.

3 Rivers 2nd Nature: River Dialogues, Collins, Goto et al. 2004

A condition of difference

A number of years ago, I sat with a group of socially engaged art practitioners as they argued back and forth about the validity, and import of their respective ways of working. As I listened to the bickering, I began a series of small drawings which I quietly discussed and developed with a colleague, Nicola Kirkham. Subsequently I've refined this idea with Reiko Goto in an article "Mapping Social and Ecological Practice." (Goto and Collins, 2005). To put this as simply as possible, artists use lyrical, critical and transformative approaches to make art in a social setting; when these three approaches are envisioned within a venn diagram, the overlap and inter-relationship becomes clear. There isn't one dominant value, there are three methods that more often than not overlap in practice. In addition most artists find themselves working in multiple areas of the diagram throughout their creative lives. It is with this insight that I began to come to grips with our tendency to differentiate ourselves through our differences, rather than through our commonalities. This is a condition that I believe undermines our collective potential. I also began to understand that all of us that seek to append ecological or environmental to our art practice, are interested in change. The long term questions for each of us is - which mode of practice is most effective for each of us, at what point in time, in what specific context? And, what does it mean? Finally how do we reflect upon and enter into a critical dialogue with artwork that intends social or environmental change?

After we talked about this over a period of a year or more, Reiko Goto decided to add some clarity to what she saw as an evolution of interesting but rather vague and general ideas. She took the time to differentiate the areas of lyrical, critical and transformative practice, providing definitions to further clarify these ideas as represented in the venn diagram.[1] (Goto and Collins, 2005; P. ___).

> In the simplest terms this is a circular continuum, a taxonomic system, that describes the methods and means by which artists create change. No point in the circle is more or less valuable than another, they are simply different. We seek to understand commonalities and differences through this process; in the hopes of creating a dialogue that will lead to more affective practice and pedagogy. Lyrical expression is a productive internal response to existing social,

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[1] Goto also went so far s to apply the idea to a number of artists as a means to test its validity and functionality.

political or environmental systems. It is a poetic response to an experience which can provide insight and new perception. It emerges from a desire to be involved (complicity) and express oneself with lyrical method and intention. Critical engagement Is primarily external from its social, political or environmental subject. It is a rational response to a particular concept or experience that reframes perception and understanding. It tends to be an analytical monologue that seldom has any capacity or framework to receive or process response. It emerges from a moral or ethical idealism. Often rational and potentially didactic the critical practice is about the application of oppositional knowledge. Transformative action requires critical (external) distance and a discursive (internal) relationship that is based in rational instrumental approaches to perception, understanding and value. It emerges from a moral and ethical position but embraces the creative potential of discourse and compromise.

This framework raises a number of issues about the form and function, as well as the criticism and validation of social and ecological art practices. Unresolved issues in that article include the problems that arise when ideas are differentiated in terms of complicit/critical dualities. There is also significant difficulty validating anything that embraces discourse and compromise within the current critical and curatorial value system. This has begun to change. I will address that change in the section on intersubjective aesthetics which you will find at the end of this article.

Art Nature and Traditional Aesthetics

Nature has been a fundamental subject of artistic practice and aesthetic inquiry throughout history. Nature has filled the artist with fear, awe and wonder. The material product of the artist or artisan is the primary subject of the philosophy of aesthetics. Since the 18th century the dominant western philosophy of aesthetics concerned itself with the appreciation of things deemed pleasing, or things with the potential to evoke an experience of the sublime. In minimal opposition: Marxist aesthetics has been more concerned with the social relationships inherent to production and reception. The operative word here is things, isolated objects that exist independent of context and those that view them. The concept model is simple, a human appreciator and a thing, framed in a neutral manner, which is then appreciated. The means of appreciation was primarily visual, the objects of consideration were carefully bounded to separate art from daily life. The viewer was expected to be properly (empirically) disinterested in the object of contemplation. These things, were then analyzed for beauty paying attention to their unity, regularity, simplicity, proportion, balance, measure and definiteness (Beardsley, M., G., 1966, Thompson 1999)[2]. Alternatively, works could be analyzed for their relationship to the sublime. The feeling of sublime emerges when a viewer considers an object, which sets up a tension between imagination and reason. In the contemplation of the finite object we find an

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[2] These formal standards were the fundamental precepts of Plato and Aristotle's 'aesthetic of beauty.'(Beardsley, M., G., 1966, Thompson 1999)

experience of expansive grandeur, wonder or awe. In this historic model of aesthetics the world is left to rational utility. These ideas of beauty and wonder are exclusive, properly separated from that world and confined within reductionist laboratories that let us see the work without the corrupting influences of social-political or environmental conflict. The white walls of the museums, the raised stage of the symphony, or the frame of the painting all provide us with a clear understanding of where we go to look and contemplate objects for their inherent aesthetic value. Modernist aesthetics have little value for artists that have embraced post-studio practices. Artists with an interest in environment, social or political issues; working with objects, texts or actions do not easily fit within this classical method of aesthetic analysis. Ecological and environmental art relies upon experiences enmeshed in complex process and natural systems. Authorship lies on a fine line between action and concept. Relevant form rarely stands alone, more often form is extracted from the context itself. Complicating things immeasurably, there is a whole social-political element of the work that cannot be ignored. The elite, disinterested root of aesthetic philosophy would seem a long way off from art practice focused upon strategic engagement with perception and human values.

Environmental Aesthetics

There are a number of important thinkers in the area of environmental aesthetics, Jay Appleton, Arnold Berleant, Alan Carlson, Ronald Hepburn, Rachel Kaplan, Stephen Kaplan and Jack Nasar. More recent voices include Emily Brady, Yuriko Saito and Cheryl Foster. Arnold Berleant author of, 'The Aesthetics of the Environment' (1992) and Allen Carlson author of, 'Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture' (2000) are two primary and often oppositional voices in this area of knowledge. In a co-edited volume of the 'Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism' (Vol 56, No 2, September 1998) they define environmental aesthetics at face value, "the application of aesthetic concerns to environment". This concept is almost the polar opposite of the traditional aesthetics outlined earlier. First the term environment qualifies aesthetics in important ways. It is inclusive and expansive opening this philosophy to consider a range of experiences, objects and contexts that would not be considered under the exclusive methods of traditional aesthetics. In the combination of environment and aesthetics a reconstructive post-modern path is drawn out of what could be described as a reductionist endgame seeking a truth that has decreasing relevance. In environmental aesthetics, the full range of nature-culture manifestations are opened up to multi-sensual perception, emotional/intellectual analysis and social-aesthetic evaluation. What was once simplified in the pursuit of empirical truth has become complicated and complicit with the world once again. The question is, can environmental aesthetic philosophy handle the complex experience of dynamic systems with intellectual tools developed over the last two centuries studying static self-referential objects of fine art and the experience of the sublime?

An Aesthetic of Engagement: Subject Object Collapse

Berleant is a philosopher and a trained musician interested in both the theory and application of his work. Since 1970 his provocative and bold writing is intended to expand the focus and purview of aesthetic philosophy. In 'The

Aesthetics of the Environment' (1992) Berleant outlines aesthetics of engagement, which seeks ultimate unification of nature and culture, declaring "there is no sanctuary from the inclusiveness of nature"(Berleant, 1992, p.8). In this model, Berleant outlines a radical aesthetic theory that casts aside the subject-object[3] relationship for what I would describe as an integrated systems analysis[4] approach to aesthetics. In this theory nature and humanity are one field, artifacts (the material product of culture) are no longer isolated and the disinterest that has marked two centuries of aesthetic philosophy gives way to passionate engagement with contextual experience. Berleant references the post-studio move into space and place as a direct challenge to the visual, where the viewer is immersed in a somatic experience of the complex and dynamic aesthetic field. He declares, "If conventional aesthetics impedes our encounters with the arts, it obstructs even more the appreciation of nature." (Berleant, 1992, p.166) The contemplation of nature is viewed as a space and place question devoid of boundaries or frames. But more importantly he states, "Nature, in the sense of the earth apart from human intervention, has mostly disappeared." (Berleant, 1992, p.166) He describes nature as a cultural artifact, through both action and conception, which is fractured by a diversity of cultures and the different ways they act upon and conceive of nature.

Berleant claims that, "The aesthetic is crucial to our very perception of the environment. It entails the form and quality of human experience in general. The environment can be seen as the condition of all such experience, where the aesthetic becomes the qualitative centre of our daily lives." (Berleant, 1992, p.57) He works to provide an aesthetic paradigm intended to open the world to a, "full perceptual vision of aesthetic, moral and political conditions." (Berleant, 1992, p.60) He seeks to close the gap between disinterested aesthetics claiming it evolved into a distinction separating art from life. His proposal is based on the following three points: The continuity between art and life; the dynamic character of art; and the humanistic functionalism of the aesthetic act. He applies these ideas to the city, working to develop what he calls an aesthetic paradigm for urban ecology. The components and focal points of his paradigm are:

- Integration of purpose and design as typified in a sailing ship.
- Integration of fantasy and spectacle, subhuman and human as revealed in the circus.

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[3] I am using the standard dictionary definition of philosophical subject: that which thinks, feels, perceives, intends etc., as contrasted with the object of thought, feeling etc.

[4] I refer to general systems theory that helps us see the complexity of a problem as an interacting collection of parts which function as a singular whole.

- Communion between heaven and earth, sanctuary and steeple found in a cathedral.
- Union between individual and celestial, organism and cosmos found in a sunset.

(Berleant, 1992, pp.62-69)

These four components are described as typical dimensions of a city that are now overlooked, subsumed or subordinate to contemporary utilitarian development. In turn they are presented as strategic interventions in cities that are part of a lasting urban aesthetic. As I wrote out these four strategies, I found myself surprised and delighted by their poetic delivery. Berleant provides us with a strategy, an aesthetic program using models and metaphors from the oldest and most delightful human experiences. As much as I enjoy the reverie, it occurs to me that what he has left out is any sense of a critical-social, or creative-social approach to art and urban ecology. He has kicked aesthetics into the present but left art in the past. There is no sense of the artist as a strategic cultural agent acting with full awareness to shift the symbols and metaphors of a culture invested in the power of state and capital who are in turn, invested in utilitarian approaches to cities. He closes with the following statement,

> It is through creating an urban environment that is a dynamic synthesis of the practical and aesthetic, where need and awareness are equally fulfilled, that function is both most complete and most humane, and where enlightened aesthetic judgment can become a social instrument toward a moral goal.
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> (Berleant, 1992, p.81)

To create a true aesthetic of engagement, enlightened aesthetic judgment has to open itself to critical and creative social-art practices. The historic components presented by Berleant provide us with a historically referential framework for a culture that integrates the aesthetic with the functional, it does not give us the right tools to achieve those goals in contemporary culture. Glorious sailing ships, spectacular circuses, breathtaking cathedrals and cities oriented to the sun emerged in cultures that put primary value on those things. The integration of the subject-object provides us with a new conceptual framework. But, the components of the paradigm are passive, more likely to conform than transgress. Integration, communion and union are based on relationship. The culture of capital and its utilitarian approach to city building are the dominant economic and political power. Re-establishing humanistic-aesthetic values in a culture of capital, will require a strategy that is both cognizant of that power and able to develop strategies to achieve the desired relationships. Artists and aesthetic philosophers who are committed to an aesthetic of engagement are going to have to get realistic about the application of their ideals. This will be the challenge of both the art and the aesthetics of engagement. I would add two components to his paradigm to open up that potential.

- the unification of society and art, aesthetics, morality and equity
- the recognition of the relationship between places, people, need and limits

A Natural Environmental Aesthetic: Subject Object Retention

Carlson's (2000) work in 'Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture' is a more deliberate approach to environmental aesthetics. The depth and rigor of his analysis is reflected in his conceptual organization of the issues and models for aesthetic appreciation of nature. He begins by defining the scope of environmental aesthetics in terms of 'what' - from pristine nature to human art. He also defines the environmental aesthetic 'scale' - from objects to bounded properties and forests. He does not identify ecosystems or the ubiquitous natural-commons such as air or water. He identifies the range of experiences: from mundane to spectacular and goes on to talk about the complex experiences that can be found in even the most common forms of nature, his stated goal is to create a set of guidelines for aesthetic appreciation that will allow 'serious and appropriate interpretations' of nature. Answering the 'what and how' question, is one of his essential preconditions for genuine aesthetic appreciation. He describes two basic orientations when we attempt to appreciate nature aesthetically. The first he describes as subjectivist or sceptical, whereby the viewer is frustrated by nature's lack of frames, design and designer. The viewer does not know what or how to appreciate the unframed landscape. His second point is described as objectivist. "In the world at large we as appreciators typically play the role of artist and let the world provide us with something like design" (Carlson, 2000, p.xix). If I understand him correctly within the recognition of pattern, we can then set boundaries which allow us to define the what which then provides the question of how to appreciate nature. He provides specific ideas about categories or models, which can inform the appreciation of nature.

> Models for the aesthetic appreciation of nature. After Carlson (2000, pp.6-8). The first is a 'formal object/landscape model', it makes the case for an environmental aesthetic by neglecting normal experience and the second is a 'metaphysical imagination model' which raises the question of our nature-culture relationship, our place within it. He considers neither to be plausible contemporary models.

> This next grouping provides the working set for his decisions. The third, the 'natural environmental model', is based upon our day to day understanding of nature and its accommodation of scientific truth. The fourth an 'arousal model' is based upon emotional and visceral response devoid of science. The fifth is a 'pluralist model' that assumes the understanding of nature is based upon a complex post-modern range of ideas that demand careful interpretation.

> The final grouping is considered out of the question for Carlson. These are models, which help define his understanding of the limits of aesthetic appreciation. Briefly, the sixth reflects Berleant's position, Carlson calls it the 'engagement model'. Carlson's critique identifies a need to retain the subject-object dichotomy, because it is the fundamental construct necessary for analytical philosophical truth. The seventh, the 'mystery

model' claims nature as an unknowable mystery. The eighth the 'non-aesthetic model' claims that aesthetics are based upon human artefacts and nature is therefore an impossible subject to focus upon. Finally there is the 'post-modern model', which generates an equity of value amongst all the forms (art, literature, science, myth) that inform our understanding of what nature is.

Carlson concludes that the natural environmental model and its close ties with scientific knowledge is the right approach. He sees its roots emanating from a tradition of thinkers like George Bernard Marsh, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold etc. Qualifying the aesthetic with the scientific adds a cachet of objectivity that he believes is important if aesthetics is to have any impact on practical environmental assessment. He is quite clear in his position, "…appreciation must be centred on and driven by the real nature of the object of appreciation itself. In all such cases what is appropriate is not an imposition of artistic or other inappropriate ideals, but rather dependence on and guidance by means of knowledge, scientific or otherwise, that is relevant given the nature of the thing in question." (Carslon, 2000, p.12) In this bold statement Carlson makes his own definitive leap for aesthetic philosophy, distancing it as far away from art as possible.

Synthesis

Berleant and Carlson are obviously diametrically opposed in their positions on the appropriate model for aesthetic appreciation of nature and the environment. Berleant claims that there is a need to collapse the subject-object dichotomy to integrate nature and culture once and for all. Carlson claims that aesthetic appreciation is actually reliant upon the subject-object dichotomy. He claims that if you can not define the object you can't achieve the goal of serious and appropriate aesthetic interpretation. I want to take a moment and think about an integrated subject/object experience and test this claim. Five years ago I was in Tokyo, Japan. I emerged from Shibuya station with my sense of personal space intact – only to be thrust into a sea of humanity. Waiting at the sidewalk for the lights to change, I stood in the densest crowd of people I have ever experienced. All piling up against the barrier of the street, rush hour pedestrians were blocked from crossing a road by rush hour traffic. As the light changed I was amazed, amused and somewhat concerned when I realized that two opposing waves of humanity (literally thousands of people) were surging forward about to engage in the middle of a large urban crosswalk completely hemmed in by idling automobiles. As we moved forward the crowd adjusted, ebbing and flowing like a school of fish simply making room for twice the population to occupy the same space. I stopped in the middle of the crosswalk and just watched as this phenomenon engulfed me.

I had entered into a public space where I the appreciator became part of a field of objects, which I was experiencing. The subject/object relationship was completely dissolved. Yet I witnessed this event with a certain amount of disinterest, and was able to retain my sense of who I am and what it was outside of myself that defined the experience I was having. Indeed not only

did I emerge with my subjectivity intact but I would submit that I was equipped to arrive at some serious and appropriate aesthetic interpretations exactly because of the collapse of the subject/object relationship. Indeed, in comparison an aesthetic philosopher with his subjectivity separate from the object of consideration - peering into this dynamic sea of humanity from a high rise building above this intersection, will likely miss important elements of the sensual, kinesthetic, social, cultural and scientifically informed experience of being on the ground as an object amongst like objects. Based on this experience, I can assume that the collapse of the subject-object dichotomy can occur at the level of experiential and conceptual understanding of the object without undermining the process of aesthetic appreciation.

This experience and subsequent reflection make me wonder if Carlson's defense of the subject/object dichotomy doesn't say more about the latent authority of critical appreciation as it relates to a separation between the making and thinking about artifacts than it does to the actual process of appreciation. With that said, I think it is important to state that I agree with the rigorous intent of Carlson's position, but not his definition of the natural-environment model. In an increasingly complicated world where industrial residues from decades past have built up to the point that they affect the global commons, the air, water and soils that sustain life, we must seek rigorous knowledge to inform the experience and appreciation of environment. Scientific knowledge is a essential, to inform experience but Carlson's decision to negate other forms of knowledge is short sighted. It is empowering to integrate aesthetic philosophy with science, after its long relationship to art. The long-term challenge is to provide a new way to see, feel, perceive and appreciate the world. The focus on a science-based aesthetic is not likely to liberate society, or aesthetic philosophers, it simply puts aesthetics in service to science. Following Berleant and his interest in the engagement model, I would say that the integration of subject and object with the sensual, kinesthetic, social, cultural and scientifically informed elements of environmental appreciation is essential. This is a challenge for artists, philosophers and scientists, it is a challenge that must be met on both the expert and non-expert levels. Aesthetic philosophy has the potential to reconnect to society through environment. Reconnecting through science simply puts aesthetic philosophy in service to society through science. The cultural intent of science, and art are different, and in important creative tension. Theodor Adorno (1997, p.231) has said, "Art is not an arbitrary cultural complement to science but rather, stands in critical tension to it. When, for instance the cultural and human sciences are rightly accused of lack of spirit, this is almost always at the same time a lack of aesthetic discernment." Philosophy needs to attend to and synthesize this difference, or we are simply framing the project of environmental aesthetics in a manner that is incomplete.

As a practicing environmental-artist and theorist, I believe that we must allow for Carlson's standard of significant and appropriate interpretation, carefully choosing the knowledge, which informs aesthetics. But we must also allow for Berleant's aesthetics of engagement. Without a collapse of the subject-object

relationship, we sit too far outside nature to understand the potential and moral imperative for integration.

Intersubjective Aesthetics

> It seems clear that art oriented toward dynamic participation rather than toward passive, anonymous spectatorship will have to deal with living contexts and that once an awareness of the ground, or setting is actively cultivated, the audience is no longer separate. The meaning is no longer in the observer, nor in the observed, but in the relationship between the two. Interaction is the key to move art beyond the aesthetic mode: letting the audience intersect with, and even form part of the process, recognizing that when observer and observed merge, the vision of static autonomy is undermined.
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> (Gablik, 1991, 151)

Predicting the evolution of work that gains strength and focus ten years later, Gablik makes it clear that we must move beyond the aesthetic mode. She challenges us from the past, raising questions that are essential to the discussions of today. There is no doubt in my mind that we must move beyond the classical aesthetic ideas of commonalities in the perception of beauty. It is also clear to me that the current laboratory approach (gallery, museum, stage) where artwork is held in temporal and cultural stasis, then aesthetically examined demands rethinking. In the previous section, Berleant and Carlosn examine the idea of the subject-object relationship which if retained provides a logical basis for claims of truth, but if imploded reframes our fundamental relationships. Our subjective understanding of the world must expand, which has the potential to develop new experience and responsibility in the process. This philosophical discourse is somewhat tangential to the dominant discussions that are occurring today in the arts. It provides us with minimal points of direct reference to art practice and criticism; it senses none of the social/institutional realities of art.

In counterpoint to environmental aesthetics I will provide a brief overview of the work of Grant Kester, Nicholas Bourriaud and one of their primary foils Clair Bishop. Where the philosophers interested in environmental aesthetics frame their analysis in terms of subject-object, by comparison the arts based historians and curators frame the analysis in terms of individual and social subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, an emerging aesthetic based upon human inter-relationships.

Kester's Dialogic Aesthetic

Grant Kester constructs a significant historical and theoretical framework, which reflects Gablik's intuition on future directions from 1991. In 'Conversation Pieces' he provides a critical aesthetic framework for artists that define themselves, "...through their ability to catalyze understanding to mediate exchange and to sustain an ongoing process of empathetic identification and critical analysis." (Kester, 2004, p118). In a well argued text he explicates the historical struggle against this kind of practice, as well as the

intellectual structure to support the practice. He stakes the intellectual basis of his work in Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about subjectivity formed through dialogic interaction. His method evolves from the ongoing dialogue about ethics and rationality vis a vis the contemporary critique of Habermas. He also make a cogent counter argument against the critical pundits that claim (on the basis of irresolvable power relationships) that dialogic interaction is not a viable means of defining community. At the core of Kester's project is a critique of the historical fixation on singular authorship and autonomous objects. He refocuses our attention upon conversational or dialogic artworks, concentrating upon the aesthetic values of carefully planned interactions by artists such as Adrian Piper, Suzanne Lacy, Helen and Newton Harrison and Fred Lonidier from the U.S.; to British artists such as Stephen Willats, Lorraine Leeson, Peter Dunn; and the Austrian group WochenKlausur. He claims that the criticism of such works, should carefully analyze the "interrelated moments of discursive interaction within a given project" (Kester, 2004, p.189). This is a significant proposal, as it means the critic needs to sustain a working relationship with the process, or rely upon the artist's record of the process to define the validity, and consistency of those moments of interaction.

Kester provides a framework and methodology to engage with work that intends a discursive approach to creative practice. First the work focuses upon listening and a dependence on intersubjective vulnerability, furthermore it examines the generation of local consensual aesthetic knowledge rather than a universalized knowledge. Kester's critical method is based upon three points of critical analysis; the context and process of the dialogue, the quality of the intersubjective exchange and indications of empathic insight (Kester, 2004, pp. 107-115). As I understand it, dialogue is the methodology, the nature of the approach. Intersubjective ethics and empathic insight are the methods that we must embrace to be effective at facilitating a creative and transformative dialogue. I think it is important to say, that while artists take a range of positions vis a vis this work, few of them pursue it with complete objectivity. In every case, there is a focus, and in the best work there is a clearly stated intent. Without that intent I would argue the work is an act of facilitation, or potentially, an act of transactional analysis rather than art. That is not to say that artists working in this area are not availing themselves of ideas in these areas of structured and transformative social interaction.

Kester's dialogic aesthetic is developed from the Kantian idea that in consideration of the aesthetic we are relieved of practical interests and instrumental intent. In other words we bracket needs and desire for a moment and consider the relevant experience for what it is, in relationship to what we understand about the world. Aesthetic experiences have transformative potential, they encourage us to think beyond the utilitarian realities of day to day life. After aesthetic experience the assumption is that we are left more open and receptive. The question Kester asks is can we experience this type of aesthetic appreciation in our relationships with other people? (Kester, 2004, p. 108) He argues that transformative experience is not constrained to things alone, and once we accept that functional reality – there is no reason to ignore discourse, collaboration and process. The dialogic practitioner

develops a social-interaction which results in a state of co-experimentation; with the potential for intersubjective transformation. This is a significant shift from object to viewer experience, to agent to agent discourse.

He differentiates this intersubjective dialogic aesthetic in terms of two main ideas. First, unlike traditional aesthetics there is no need for a universal or objective aesthetic. The dialogic aesthetic is based upon consensus that is arrived at locally. This is a huge leap from the predominant notion that aesthetic perception has to be linked to universality through transcendent authority. Transcendent authority throughout history has been defined in relationship to God through mysticism and faith; and to reason in terms of the defensible (or replicable) truths. Secondly, the entry into aesthetic perception is traditionally individualistic, and once the experience has been processed the viewer is prepared to enter into discourse vis a vis the shifts that have occurred in subjective perception and (potentially) understanding. Kester suggests that discourse is not only a one-way tool to be used to communicate what has been experienced. We can enter into an aesthetic discourse which has the potential for inter-subjective communication which can result in shifts to perception and understanding. To synthesize my understanding here, the dialogic aesthetic is an aesthetic of diverse consensual knowledge, which is dynamic and linked to a discursive network or public. A condition of the formation of that discursive network or public is the potential for intersubjective transformation through discursive inter relationship.

His analytic framework for dialogic art includes the idea that the function of art is to serve as an "...open space within contemporary culture: a space in which certain questions can be asked, certain critical analysis articulated, that would not be accepted or tolerated elsewhere." The other approach involves an identification of those "....salient characteristics and linking these to aspects of aesthetic experience that have been abandoned or redirected in some way during the modern period" Kester, 2004, p. 68) The specific areas that interest him are a critical temporal sensibility and spatial imagination. In simpler terms he also identifies this as the, "...ability to comprehend and represent complex social and environmental systems" (Kester, 2004, p. 69). I agree that the foundation of knowledge in the arts is a point of constant critical discourse and conflict. As a result, we accept a wider range of ideas than other disciplines that are more invested in defensible and replicable truths. This is both the fundamental strength and a weakness of art. But what Kester is referring to here is not a latent potential but rather a fundamental extant in the work.

Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetic

Nicholas Bourriaud's text was not written with the same purposeful intent of Kester's. A collection of previously written articles has been reworked into a provocation of contemporary aesthetics. He defines his aesthetic as, "...judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt." He defines the work, in terms of, "...human relations and their social context, rather than independent and private space" (Bourriaud, 2002, pp. 112-113). He is interested in the viewers immersion in the work, the nature of the dialogue that the work may engender and the potential for the viewer to occupy the same space as the work itself. He

claims that art challenges the a priori notion of what we perceive, and that meaning is the result of interaction between the artist and the observer. This is the baseline upon which he examines the relational practices of artists such as Liam Gillick, Rikrit Taravanija, Carsten Holler and others. In a chapter on the 'Policy of Forms', he clearly states his intent to retain a commitment to aesthetic value without getting waylaid by the politics, or validity of the social critique (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 80-92). He proposes a relational aesthetic, "...taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space." (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 14) Bourriaud's primary thesis lies in the shift from representation, its production and reception to a more interactive relational concept. Another way to consider this is as a move from delineating the culture that unfolds before us, to the development of alternate universes and relationships. He sees this as a shift in the social, economic and institutional function of art. He refers to a 'growing urbanisation' of art practice, a cultural shift from acquisition, maintenance and display of possessions in a museum or gallery, a space to be 'walked through'. Versus the idea of city space, a framework of intersubjective space and time that is 'lived through' (Bourriaud, 2002, pp. 14-18). Bourriaud is not offering a major shift in the artworld or aesthetic philosophy, merely an alternate space of creative endeavour. This is a strategic framework, developed so that the older institutional models do not constrain the work and the ideas that inform its reception. This is the strength of the hypothesis.

Bourriaud's aeshetic is framed within Felix Guattari's (1992) ideas of subjectivity as something that is formed in social inter-relationship. He is primarily interested in liberation of subjectivity, a release based on Guattari's social analysis. Guattari's work was developed within a state hospital, the concepts are based in a strucutral analysis of power and its points of tranverse connection to that hierarchical structure. Guattari is interested in the relationship between subjects in isolation (a condition of neuroses) and the development of subject groups where the ability to make a statement is both heard and verified. Genosko provides clarity on this, "The joining of a subject group enables a patient to become a signifier in a communication system whose members are interdependent, yet simultaneously in a relation of difference, but nonetheless totally involved in a collective process which frees one from the individuated hell of isolation." (Genosko in Guattari, 2000, p. 124) This psychological framework, developed within an institutional setting is considered to be a radical shift in ideas of subjectivity, indeed, Genosko and Bourriaud both claim it as the basis for a new form of social creativity (Genosko in Guattari, 2000, p. 151) (Bourriaud, 2002, pp. 88-92). But the following statement is also telling of Bourriaud's relationship to that foundational principle. "Guattari's concepts are ambivalent and supple, so much so that they can be translated into many different systems" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 86). In this reference Bourriaud gives us an indication of the complexities and the vagary of Guattari's writing. With its references to liberation through creativity, the development of new forms of being that link the mind, the body and the social, ecological and political, it is both a beacon of desire, and a difficult body of work to understand. By my reading it is uncomfortably close to the inchoate definition of art itself.

Bourriaud differs from Grant Kester in that he grounds his relational aesthetic back into the materialist tradition (Kester stays focused upon the intersubjective process). The physical product remains the fulcrum of aesthetic consideration in Bourriaud's contribution, although it is the relational impact that he seeks. Ultimately he sees the artists as, 'An entrepreneur/politician/director' Furthermore, he states that, "The most common denominator shared by all artists is that they *show* something" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 108). It isn't objects that he envisions in this statement, but rather constructed spaces for encounter, often spaces that are indicated or created from within museums and urban places. For clarity I would suggest that we can think of these projects as laboratory experiments in the discursive forms, or the setting for public realm discourse. Kester describes this way of working, and its critical analysis as attending to the, "...mise-en-scène for dialogic interaction" (Kester, 2004, p. 189). This is the articulation of the space in which the dialogue occurs.

Bourriaud's fundamental position is not one of discourse, but the meaning and function of form when it is framed and defined by the intent to engender dialogue. His means of validation harks backwards rather than forwards, the work, "...has to be judged in a formal way: in relation to art history, and bearing in mind the political value of forms" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 82). Bourriaud seems to occupy that difficult seat on the fence, or possibly he is simply more pragmatic and realizes that until more take it upon themselves to realize that there is a fence worth peering over, to leap over it is a dangerous proposition. Kester and Berleant are boldly willing to leave the infrastructure of the dominant aesthetic behind, while Bourriaud moves into the new subjectivity with more discretion. Despite this equivocation and the care he takes to bridge the past with the present the work is subject to the claim that it lacks formal resolution, and has weak historic precedent. In response he states,

> Forms are developed one from another. What was yesterday regarded as formless or 'informal' is no longer these things today. When the aesthetic discussion evolves, the status of form evolves along with it and through it.
>
> (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 21)

This is another way of saying that we see what we can conceptualize. More importantly within this framework exists a major shift from the ideas of a classical aesthetics as a philosophy of things, primarily visually perceived and valued in common; to an evolutionary philosophy that sees aesthetics as a discursive process of social and spatial evolution; through a dialectic of perception and conception. In the relational aesthetic we start to see those things that connect rather than those things that define the edges of that which is perceived. This is the strength and the import of Bourriaud's text as I understand it. The new aesthetic ideas in subjectivity are no longer

reactionary but revolutionary, they have the potential to help us 'see' the path that we are in pursuit of.

Bishop's Critical Counterpoint

Kester and Bourriaud are amongst the authors considered in an ongoing series of critical articles by Claire Bishop: 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' (2004) and 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents' (2006). In the first text, she references Rosalind Krauss's demand for media specificity, this is considered essential if the work is to 'self-reflexively operate', this is in Bishop's own words the "...holy grail of criticality." (Bishop, 2004, p. 64) Notably, Bishop's interests run to media complexity, specifically in the area of installation art. Her interest in that work (and her own conception of the holy grail) is focused upon the experience that is produced through the work in relation to the viewing subject. Where she parts with Kester in particular and Bourriaud only in more general terms; is their move away from the material reality of the work, toward the political and social discourse that the work engenders. But Bishop does not ignore this area entirely, she references Deutsche and her insights about conflict. She uses that to interrogate power and conflict in relational art works. There is a common interest in intersubjectivity, although there is not a common critical basis for its analysis. Bishop's interests seem to be primarily based in an agonistic approach to relational practices, following Deutsche, Laclau and Mouffe. While Kester's approach is more firmly routed in the discursive approach typical of Habermas, Bahktin and Levinas. Bourriaud comes at the question of intersubjectivity through the radical psychology of Guatarri, with specific references to 'the three ecologies'. Below, is a quote from Bishop that clarifies the common ground she does share with Kester and Bourriaud.

> The tasks facing us today are to analyze *how* contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the *quality* of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifest in the experience of the work.
> (Bishop, 2004, p. 78)

The 2004 article primarily focuses upon Bourriaud's text and his critical insight. She takes him to task for his unremitting interest in the structure of discourse, the scene of dialogic encounter, and what she perceives as a flaccid political point of view. She is particularly critical of Bourriaud's interest in convivial relationships of dubious political intent, a criticism that I would agree with.

There are three issues for Bishop, first the political, moral and ethical standards of the work, is simply not tough enough, not up to her agonistic standard of critical inquiry. Secondly she claims that the work is predicated upon a false modernist ideal, the concept of a whole or singular public, a homogenous sense of community. Finally the emergence of moral and ethical judgment in art troubles her, as there appears to be some fear that it will replace what she refers to as "higher criteria" (Bishop, 2004, p. 78). In the

end, she stakes her ground, "The work of Hirschhorn and Sierra is better art not simply for being better politics (although both of these artists now have equally high visibility on the blockbuster art circuit.) Their work acknowledges the limitations of what is possible as art... and subjects to scrutiny all easy claims for a transitive relationship between art and society" (Bishop, 2004, p. 79). In addition she asks, "But does the fact that the work of Sierra and Hirschhorn demonstrates better democracy make it better art?" (Bishop, 2004, p. 77). One problem occurs when Bishop demands a standard of diverse publics, yet at the same time retains a highly specialized and singular view of democracy. Other problems occur as she occupies the high ground declaring herself to be the arbiter of 'better art' and 'better democracy'. On one level this is what critics do, on another level her validating reference to the 'blockbuster art circuit' and agonistic democracy are limited at best. She has clarity about what has to be done, she even claims that the links between artistic quality and political efficacy need better integration, yet she is willing to give very little room to explore those relationships within her standards. For instance, while I agree that the political intent of the relational art argument is weak, it isn't because it lacks agonistic application, it is because it is not political, it is primarily social. In turn, the work that Bishop venerates reveals or more to the point manufactures public realm conflict. The art creates an agonistic spectacle, a fetish indulgence in manufactured conflict that contributes little. Neither the work, nor the critic recognizes the need for the convivial sensibilities that are the counterpoint to public realm conflict and the source of passions that encourage resolution.

Bishop returns to her interest with more clarity and a bit more of an ideological position in the essay that follows. The main point of contention in this article is the ethical and moral turn in criticism. Empathetic approaches to collaboration and social practice are tainted in her mind by relationship to the community arts tradition. Clear and singular authorship is important to her critical world view (in the same way that media specificity is essential to Krauss), and anything that undermines that is suspect. Reviewing Kester, she seems to miss the point of his effort with her admonition that reviewed through his standard, "...a collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art." (Bishop, 2006, p. 81) The critical distinction she seems to have missed here is that his aesthetic treatise is specifically targeted towards dialogue, with a clearly stated intent to ignore material content of the work. So the art can't be something that is separate, unless of course she deems him to be incapable of making that decision. While there is much to her critical view that is worth considering, her bias against distributed authorship, her need to patrol the boundaries of aesthetics and limit new approaches to subjectivity ultimately undermine her substantive critical perspective. The sense that the work can not be defined by consensus and agreement alone, gets lost in what is ultimately a conservative reaction to new work and criticism.

She closes her article with the following admonition:

> As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière has observed, this denigration of the aesthetic ignores the fact that the system of

art as we understand it in the West – the 'aesthetic regime of art' inaugurated by Friedrich Schiller and the Romantics and still operative to this day – is predicated precisely on a confusion between art's autonomy (its position as at one remove from instrumental rationality) and heteronomy (its blurring of art and life).   (Bishop, 2006, p. 183)

Personally I see no denigration of the aesthetic in the work of Kester or Bourriaud. I see a much needed update to an area of knowledge which has vociferously exclaimed its own limitations. Mary Deveraux has stated that, "...aesthetics has benefited from 'an ethical turn': a revival of long-standing debates about the moral function of narrative and the social impact of the arts" (Deveraux, 1996). She refutes the claims of timelessness and universality that Bishop relies upon, suggesting that the discipline is only now emerging from the doldrums of the past. Where Berleant, and Eaton forge new ways forward in subject-object relationship; where Kester experiments with radical creative inter-relationship and Bourriaud considers the material space of discursive relationship; critics like Bishop are more worried about quality and the structure that allows for impeccable defence. I am not convinced that defence is what is called for, when fundamental critical principles are slipping far beyond the social, political and aesthetic realities of our life in this time. Bishop relies on two points, a sense of overt criticality in the work, and the retention of oppositional dialectic positions (such as autonomy and heteronomy), as she searches for her own 'holy grail of criticality', I am not sure it is there to be found.

The equivocation that is typical of art, curatorial activity and criticism do not serve us as well as they did at the turn of the 20th Century. Where it might have been a radical act 100 years ago to claim autonomous heteronomy; today this position simply reinforces the artist's role in the past, as a condition of today. Used as a validating principle it is increasingly a point of constraint rather than a path to help us develop and understand new theory and its relationship to practice.

Bishop's contribution is essential to the development of this work. She provides an important critical relationship to Kester and Bourriaud. If we are to move ideas about this work and its validation forward, we need authors like Bishop to engage these issues in august publications such as October and Artforum. These are not the typical sites for this kind of discussion. The struggle in all of this work, will be to see how long it takes for the 'aesthetic regime' she refers to, to catch up to new practices and theories. Bishop has also said, "Political moral and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago" (Bishop, 2004, p. 77). In the sum of this work, these are important indications of a change. From convivial discourse to agonistic criticism, art has begun to move beyond the 'aesthetic mode' as Gablik predicted it would back in 1991.

Conclusion

 I use the philosophers and theorists above, to help me think through my ideas about how artists might redefine and reconnect relationships between society and environment. There is no society without the physical and phenomenological realities, the nutrients and organisms that provide the raw material that support human life and its cultural constructs. As a result I see our work as spanning both the social and environmental/ecological sides of the aisle.

From 2000-2006 Reiko Goto and I directed and guided the development of a five year collaborative art project that intended to change the way the rivers were understood and experienced in the former coal and steel region of Western Pennsylvania. The work, the 3 Rivers 2nd Nature Project was a shallow dialogue conducted over a land mass of 645 square miles, focusing upon changing the regional relationship to three rivers and 56 sub-watersheds. Our fundamental focus was to make it clear that the industrial era was defined by 'resource-ability' while the emergent era is defined by 'response-ability'. In places like Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, response-ability for the soil, water, air and land (the fundamental context for life) was a relatively unspoken concept, an ideal in some people's minds but not a programme of public intent, and certainly not one of pubic policy. We set ourselves the artistic challenge to change that.

The work on 3 Rivers 2nd Nature was not primarily visual, it included conceptual and collaborative process that were dialogic by intent. The work was planned as a broad discourse. An emergent narrative, a story of cultural change that embraced art, and science to reveal ecological potential, to examine environmental policy and develop creative tools that would support a range of people interested in transformative action. Each and every effort was predicated upon learning, understanding and disseminating ideas about change. The work was a tiered

In Allegheny County, the gift of a relationship to water is a historic public good and a natural right that was compromised during the last century. The recovery of water quality, natural riverbanks, public access, and recreational uses of our regional rivers and streams is good for the economy and our communities. It is an investment in the future of our children.

A draft proclamation in support of the waters of Allegheny County

We must:

- Create a direct relationship between people and the water
- Upgrade all water quality to the standard for swimming
- Find the source, cause, and solution to water quality problems
- Stop downstream pollution, that affects other communities
- Provide watershed education and information for all citizens
- Work with local communities to monitor local water quality
- Treat wetlands and streams as economic and ecological assets
- Preserve natural riverbanks, wetlands and streams
- Conserve diversity of plants and wildlife in and along rivers and streams
- Restore the ecological functions of riverbanks and wetlands where possible
- Remember and restore the best of pre-industrial access and use of the rivers
- Accommodate and celebrate the public's right to use the rivers
- Redevelop with intent to be ecologically and economically sustainable
- Work with communities to restore and enhance the culture along the rivers

http://3r2n.cfa.cmu.edu

I would like to sign these principles as an individual _____
                                                    Name   Date

I would like to sign these principles representing _____
                                                    Organization   Date

☐ I made changes to the principles prior to signing
Initials

A draft proclamation in support of the waters of Allegheny County

collaboration throughout the process, with the team carrying out dialogues with experts, institutions and citizens all at the same time. The work resulted in a cascade of papers, reports and articles, as well as an exhibition and catalogue that contributed to an informed public dialogue. The work was taken before municipal officials and a range of local, state and federal agencies by ourselves our colleagues and our acquaintances. If we desire to expand the experience of creative discourse we must enable understanding and insinuate and establish new platforms where that can occur. If we want to enable transformative practice it is quite clear to me that it is my responsibility to disseminate and activate the ideas, and seek outcomes from this work.

A work like 3 Rivers 2nd Nature is 3 parts art and aesthetics, 3 parts science, 3 parts public dialogue and 1 part politics. The new aesthetic ideas discussed here provide us with an intellectual framework to consider our intellectual and practical creative relationship to change, and begin to develop the reflective dialogue that will allow this work to develop further. The science as developed in this project provides us with a sense of the opportunities and constraints, the politics define the limits of our potential for success. The real challenge in this artwork is neither material, conceptual or theoretical it is a question of dialogue, and that dialogue is ultimately very political. Who is listening, who is responding and who keeps the ideas fresh in the cultural milieu? When the dialogue dies, or the passions that fuel the conflict die away, when the ideas are formalized or simply denied - the artwork has ended. The question of success or failure of that artwork can then be examined in relationship to the artists intent, the record of the process and the actual outcomes after the fact.

For more information on 3 Rivers 2nd Nature, see http:3r2n.cfa.cmu.edu.

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