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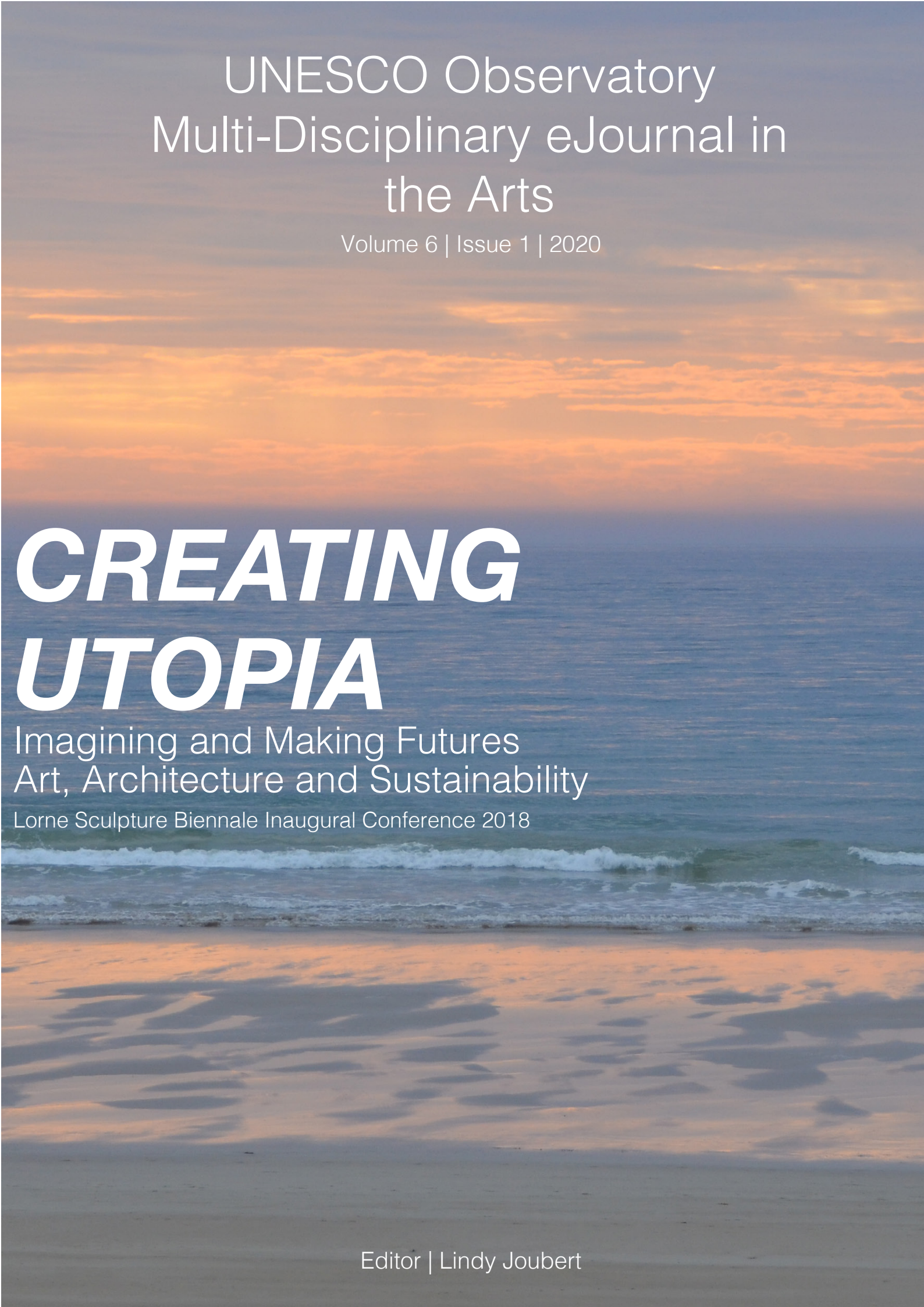

CREATING UTOPIA

Imagining and Making Futures
Art, Architecture and Sustainability

Lorne Sculpture Biennale Inaugural Conference 2018

Editor | Lindy Joubert

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EDITORIAL TEAM

ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multidisciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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COVER IMAGE

Leon Walker
Photography at
The Lorne Sculpture
Biennale 2018

THEME

The inaugural conference, 'Creating Utopia Imagining and Making Futures: Art, Architecture and Sustainability' was held at Qdos Gallery, Lorne in March as part of The Lorne Sculpture Biennale (LSB) for 2018, under the Biennale's curatorial theme of 'Landfall, Nature + Humanity + Art'.

The sixth Lorne Sculpture Biennale was a vibrant festival celebrating the best of Australian and international sculpture. The stunning Lorne foreshore became a picturesque pedestal for a curated landscape of sculptures, presented alongside an exciting program of events devoted to pressing global issues of nature and endangerment, under the distinguished curation and visionary direction of Lara Nicholls, curator at the NGA Canberra.

Accompanying LSB 2018 was the inaugural two-day conference, 'Creating Utopia, Imagining and Making Futures: Art, Architecture and Sustainability'. Keynote and invited speakers – conservationists, visual artists, architects and academics – reflected on issues of environmental degradation, processes of social and environmental transformation and regeneration, from a diverse and thought-provoking range of viewpoints.

"Creating Utopia" examined the green revolution – greater than the industrial revolution and happening faster than the digital revolution. The speakers were introduced by the inimitable Design Professor, Chris Ryan, whose elegant and thoughtful comments to each presenter added a distinctive contribution. Issues relating to climate change; facing uncertain global futures and protecting our planet by taking control, being prepared, and offering solutions for long-term impacts were the topics. The conference heard the voices of experts who offered innovative and well researched future directions to the world's mounting problems.

Invited Speakers included Mona Doctor-Pingel, an architect, based in Auroville, India since 1995. Her keynote address, 'Journeying to Oneness through architecture in Auroville, South India', discussed the natural and built landscapes found in the unique social utopia that is Auroville, with an emphasis on experimental building techniques using local materials and craft principles, inspired by biology.

Esther Charlesworth, Professor in the School of Architecture and Design at RMIT University, the Academic Director of the new RMIT Master of Disaster, Design and Development degree [MoDDD], and the founding Director of Architects without Frontiers (AWF). Since 2002, AWF has undertaken over 42 health, education and social infrastructure projects in 12 countries for vulnerable communities. Esther spoke about the role Architects can play in improving the social and economic capacity of vulnerable people through design.

Janet Laurence is a Sydney-based artist who exhibits nationally and internationally. Her practice examines our relationship to the natural world, and has been exhibited widely, including as an Australian representative for the COP21/FIAC, Artists 4 Paris Climate 2015 exhibition, and an artist in residence at the Australian Museum.

Professor John Fien, based in Architecture and Urban Design at RMIT, spoke about the techniques and strategies for countering human harm of the environment based on design thinking and education for sustainable development.

Professor Ray Green, Landscape Architecture at the University of Melbourne presented his research on 'The Changing character of Australian coastal settlements assessed through the eyes of local: A perceptual modelling approach', exploring how ordinary people living in smaller Australian coastal communities conceptualize the "character" of the places they live and the changes they have noticed. In many such communities the valued 'character' of people's towns and individual neighbourhoods is being lost, often as a result of replacement of older, vernacular forms of architecture with new buildings and changes to the natural landscape that do not fit into the local residents' established images of their towns and neighbourhoods.

This issue, volume 6, issue 1 of the 'UNESCO journal, multi-disciplinary research in the arts' www.unescoejournal.com offers essays from a diverse range of authors and they are as follows:

Gabrielle Bates is a Sydney-based artist and writer exploring the intersections between place, politics and esoteric practice. Gabrielle has undertaken three residencies in Southeast Asia, and her art works have been selected for many competitive award exhibitions. A major survey of her paintings was held at Victoria University and she has produced 11 solo exhibitions.

Dr Greg Burgess, Melbourne-based Principal Designer at Gregory Burgess Architects, discussed architecture as a social, healing and ecological art. Burgess' international reputation has been established through a significant award-winning body of work, which features housing, community, cultural (including Indigenous), educational, health, religious, commercial, exhibition design and urban design projects.

Dr. Alecia Bellgrove is a Senior Lecturer in Marine Biology and Ecology with Deakin's School of Life and Environmental Sciences, and a marine ecologist with botanical and zoological training. Her research focuses on the role of habitat-forming seaweeds in ecological systems, their life history dynamics, and the impacts of anthropogenic disturbances such as sewage effluent and climate change. Her paper focussed on feeding the world with seaweed, without killing the planet. Although seaweed has many negative connotations, it plays a fairly major role in life here on earth - it is the primary producer of oxygen, it serves as the base for food webs and is a habitat provision. Seaweed she assured us can be the solution to many of our problems.

Dr. Ching-Yeh Hsu, Professor at the Department of Visual Arts, University of Taipei spoke about the role of visual art in creating utopia. Deeply rooting your art in nature creates a greater rapport and appreciation for nature itself, she maintains, while the use of abandoned material and junk for the creation of art is also a powerful way to express ideas for mutualism with the environment.

Jane and Peter Dyer, urban beekeepers based in middle-ring suburban Melbourne. Their apiary, Backyard Honey Pty Ltd, was seeded a decade ago with the idea of creating a micro-business that would work towards shifting negative perceptions about bees and help shape a sustainable future. Their paper provided an advocacy opportunity to actively explore the intersection of bees with art, architecture and landscape in a sustainable future.

Their presentation, A BeeC's – changing our thinking to changing the world, was developed to highlight the following aspects: Why do we need bees? What do healthy bees need? They provided an overview of built environments that actively promote bees through art, landscape and architecture.

Adjunct Professor Anton Hassel from RMIT claims non-indigenous people living in Australia find themselves on an ancient land mass that is nearly, but not quite, familiar. It is a landscape with unique archetypal cadences, an ambient pulse that unsettles us, and against which our imported familiar architectures and garden-planting schemes act as a bulwark to its strangeness, keeping us émigrés to country.

Professor David Jones and his team, Mandy Nicholson, Glenn Romanis, Isobel Paton, Kate Gerritsen and Gareth Powell wrote 'Putting Wadawurrung meaning into the North Gardens Landscape of Ballarat'. The paper discusses creating the first Indigenous-inspired sculpture landscape in Australia. This paper, prepared by the Indigenous-rich consultant team in conjunction with the Wadawurrung (Wathaurung Aboriginal Corporation) and City of Ballarat, reviews the aspirations of the project together with these narratives and relationships in etching a design and master plan on the canvas.

Paula Llull spoke of Nature as being at the core of artistic creation. The inclusion in art of ideas like ecosystems, natural environment or extinction requires a medium that minimises the distance between the artwork and the spectator. She spoke of the work of Janet Laurence as one of the most remarkable contributions to this current. In particular, her installation Deep Breathing. Resuscitation for the Reef illustrates the commitment of the artist in communicating with feeling the threats such as global warming and its resulting acidification of oceans on particular natural environments.

Phillip B. Roös, Anne S. Wilson, and David S. Jones presented their research on 'The Biophilic Effect: Hidden living patterns within the dance of light''.

They challenged the notion of 'Healthy cities' and 'well-being' as being the most topical and misused words in our global society. They see them being used in discourses about new strategies and policies to create urban environments often masking a failing 'healthy economy'. This discourse, they claim, is the result of our human-made environments as a consequence of our Western quest for 'development', having 'economic renewal' as part of our global urbanisation. This quest appears to be casting aside our primal knowledge of living structures and systems, our important spiritual and innate affiliations to the natural world that we are part of, and thereby loss of biophilia.

Dr. Shoso Shimbo is a garden designer from the esteemed Japan Horticultural Society, specialising in Japanese gardens. He is a director of the International Society of Ikebana. His work in this field, and that as an environmental artist seeks to harness the life force of nature. His sculptural works have featured in some of the nation's major contemporary art exhibitions, and a new work 'Sea Snakes: Trash Vortexes' was a feature of LSB 2018.

Marcus Tatton's sculpture practice is an example of using recycled, natural materials. He works as a sculptor for over of thirty years in Tasmania, Marcus acknowledges that the purpose of his sculpture making is seeking enlightenment. Marcus lives in line with the Asian proverb "to seek enlightenment is to chop wood".

Dr. Rose Woodcock, from Deakin University, presented her research and investigations into a practice-led project 'Merri Creek to the MCG', featuring broken glass sourced from along the Merri Creek in Melbourne's north. The status and function of the glass is ambiguous but rich in possibilities, with the glass fragments connecting her practice with issues of soil sustainability. Rose drew upon aspects of Parmenides' poem on the nature of 'what is' to explore the workings of language, in particular how poetic language can open up otherwise tightly construed discourses.

In conclusion, the conference was a wonderful success in a beautiful setting amidst the gum trees and birds surrounding the atmospheric Qdos Gallery. All the papers were inspirational and left an indelible mark on the audience. Sincere thanks to all who attended, the excellent list of speakers, the team - Graeme Wilkie OAM for his overall, tireless support; Lara Nicholls the LSB curator for her helpful ideas and professionalism; Gillian Oliver for the superb food; Laurel Guymer, the behind the scenes angel of 'La Perouse' at Lorne who managed the bookings and accommodation and our diligent rapporteur, Jeremy Laing. The excellent Deakin University intern student managed all computer glitches, problems and presentation hurdles.

Sincere thanks goes to Evelyn Firstenberg who generously and professionally edited all the conference papers. These people and others, the LSB committee and particularly Deakin University who gave generously for the LSB Education Program, enabled the 'Creating Utopia' conference to make a significant contribution to issues relating to climate change, environmen-

Lindy Joubert
Editor-in-chief

Environmental Art as Public Art

Shoso Shimbo

ABSTRACT

The ongoing destruction of our environment by man-made pollution continues to push the world towards catastrophic circumstances. In response, we are seeing the emergence of an eco-centric perspective in contemporary art. This practice-based research looks into how environmental art can be effective in communicating environmental and cultural issues in the context of contemporary public art in Australia.

This research aims to explore a possibility of slow and gradual cultural changes, in particular changes in attitude to nature through environmental art. Through the production of artworks for public sculpture exhibitions and art festival commissions, this study intends to develop an alternative approach to environmental art in order to transform socio-cultural values, with particular reference to pre-modern Japanese aesthetics and its cosmologies that are often embodied in some elements of Ikebana. It further hopes to investigate whether Ikebana principles and values could con-tribute to the development of environmental art as a vehicle of message.

Introduction

The ongoing destruction of our environment by man-made pollution continues to push the world towards catastrophic circumstances. In response, we are seeing the emergence of an eco-centric perspective in contemporary art. This practice-based research looks into how environmental art can be effective in communicating environmental and cultural issues in the context of contemporary public art in Australia.

This research aims to explore a possibility of slow and gradual cultural changes, in particular changes in attitude to nature through environmental art. Through the production of artworks for public sculpture exhibitions and art festival commissions, this study intends to develop an alternative approach to environmental art in order to transform socio-cultural values, with particular reference to pre-modern Japanese aesthetics and its cosmologies that are often embodied in some elements of Ikebana. It further hopes to investigate whether Ikebana principles and values could contribute to the development of environmental art as a vehicle of message.

While the current Western culture has been recognised by many as unsustainable, a number of indigenous cosmologies have been noted to offer ecological wisdom allowing people to live in environmentally sensitive ways. Similarly, environmental aesthetics and cosmology in Japanese traditional art such as Ikebana, may offer alternative perspectives in considering strategies for sustainability.

Although indigenous philosophy has played a significant role in the social and art movements for environmental protection in such areas as Latin America (Demos, 2016), premodern Japanese cosmologies have not been recognised adequately so far, especially in terms of their relationships to contemporary environmental art.

In an effort to reevaluate Japanese classic values, however, we need to be aware of the strong criticism in Japanese studies against Nihonjin-ron, cultural nationalism of Japan. From the 1960s to the 1980s, a number of publications on Japanese culture and society claimed Japan as a unique, harmonious and nature-loving nation, without sufficient scientific evidence. In addition, it is necessary to note a rather dated but still valid warning against becoming overly romantic about “primitive” religions (Earhart,1970). This warning would be valid in the production of various art works, from superficial imitation of the models presented to more sophisticated assimilation of different cultures.

Questions

1. What kind of strategies has environmental art developed for socio-cutural transformation?

2. How can environmental art be effective as a vehicle of message?

3. What are seen as the roots of unsustainable culture?

4. How have non-Western cultures contributed to environmental remedies?

5. And for me personally, how can a premodern Japanese worldview be

“Environmental Art”: Definitions and categorisations

The definition of environmental art is constantly changing. The transition from formalist-minimalist outdoor land art to work that actively incorporated social and ecological goals, both symbolically and literally, was progressive (Wainwright, 2006:32). After the 1990s, the term environmental art has been associated with artists who pursue environmental and conservationist agendas. They generally mean to remedy damage rather than poeticise it, considering the natural world as “a realm to influence directly - a sphere of action to transform and improve through creative means” (Brown, 2014:6). Environmental art is unique in providing various approaches to tackle the intertwined and complex environmental crises and offering artists “a new way to synthesise art and nature” (Matilsky, 1992:57).

Such a tendency is inevitably associated with an instrumentalist view of art, focusing on art’s extrinsic rather than intrinsic values. Instrumentalism stresses that the purpose of art is to cause positive social change. Art is not intrinsically valuable, but valuable according to what it contributes to causes outside itself.

Actually, since its initial formation in the 1960s, environmental art has often been discussed and evaluated for its extrinsic values. For instance, the effectiveness of environmental art as a learning strategy has been highly evaluated (Marks, Chandler & Baldwin, 2016 a & b). It is therefore understandable that some of the notable surveys of environmental art focus on the functionality of the artworks (Thornes, 2008; Wainwright, 2006; Wiley, 2011).

Environmental artworks run the gamut from works where the ecological dimension is symbolic and/or focused on raising awareness of environmental issues, to work that carry out serious ecological, restorative goals on a landscape ecological scale. Works of this latter sort have a more palpable, measurable functional aspect, and tend to be called “eco-activist” because of this (Wainwright, 2006:85).

Rather than proposing further complicated or comprehensive categorisations, the three most characteristic types of environmental art according to their intended outcomes are discerned here: value/cultural transformation, literal environmental remedy, and social transformation.

The categories of these functional goals are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

Value/cultural transformation

The focus of the works in this category is chiefly to raise awareness of environmental problems, and actual environmental remedy is often indirect or symbolic. Pascale Martine Tayou (b. 1967) recycled colourful plastic bags and created a large installation, Plastic Bags (2001- 11). It comments on our mass consumption society and makes us aware that a great number of plastic bags are circulating around the globe and causing environmental pollution. A series of photographs, Midway: Message from the Gyre (2009-2013) by Chris Jordan (b.1963), depicts rotting carcasses of baby birds which are filled with plastic. These birds were fed plastic by their parents who mistook floating plastic for food. The images reveal direct but often unnoticed consequences of the plastic pollution which humans are causing.

Literal environmental remedy

The works in this category intend to produce measurable ecological benefits. To produce environment remedial effect, artists often collaborate with scientists or institutions. Although the scale of positive results produced by environmental art in the category is generally limited, it often has symbolical significance. Watershed sculptures by Mary O'Brien & Daniel McCormick are woven and shaped of willow and elderberry branches. Their work stabilises a creek bank, functions as silt traps collecting the eroded soil and debris, and restores the ecosystem (McCormick, 2003). Patricia Johanson's Leonhardt Fair Park Lagoon (1981-86) transformed "a dead and dangerous body of water on the Texas State Fair grounds in Dallas" into "a robust eco-aesthetic" community park (Wainwright, 2006). In collaboration with botanists and ecologists, Johanson chose water plants to restore ecological health. She then installed her large sculptures to create micro ecosystems, providing safe places for lagoon wildlife.

Social transformation

Some environmental artists contribute to environmental activism with the aim of actual social reforms. Through his project 7000 Oaks-City Forestation Instead of City Administration (1982), Joseph Beuys (1921-86) planted 7,000 oak trees over several years in Kassel, Germany to bring about environmental and social change. His project is regarded as "an extensive artistic and ecological intervention with the goal of enduringly altering the living space of the city"(7000 Oaks,Wikipedia).

Some of the recent examples in this category are discussed by T.J. Demos, who instigates the acknowledgement of "the conceptual lineages of the theories elaborated in the Western academy and tracing their connection to the histories of struggles and perspectives of the colonised, including Indigenous cosmologies, subaltern legal codes, and social movements where appropriate" (Demos, 2016:22). Demos (2015 & 2016) specifically accentuates Biemann and Tavare's multimedia installation Forest Law (2014), that investigated the conflict between Indigenous people and the oil industry in the Ecuadoran Amazon. While the indigenous people interviewed in the video express their views on life and environments that originated in their culture (Rehberg, 2015), Demos (2016) emphasises that those philosophies have manifested in recent constitutional amendments and legal codes, including the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth, instituted in Ecuador in 2008.

Environmental Art as a vehicle of message

In response to the urgency of climate change and environmental degradation, it is inevitable that there is much discussion about the actual remedial effects of environmental art and its connection with environmental activism, two of the most distinguishable categories of environmental art. However, there may be a threat of overemphasising the instrumentalist view of art in those discourses. Focusing greatly on the production of useful, direct and measurable results may overlook other aspects of environmental art, thereby limiting its potential.

Noticeably, some artists insist that art is not about changing the environment, but it is about changing the people who influence the environment. It is the category of value/cultural transformation in environmental art that those artists are interested in. In particular, when environmental art is presented as public art under certain conditions, its function as a vehicle of message, raising awareness of environmental issues, can be crucial.

In terms of the attributions of environmental art as a vehicle of message, Williams (2013/14) distinguishes between slow art with aesthetic sophistication and fast art with public accessibility. When environmental art is incorporated in the context of primary education, for instance, the artworks generally need to be fast art. It is worth noting her question, "why art with public appeal, as against the qualities we recognise as necessary conditions of significant art, need be mutually exclusive" (Williams, 2013/14:22).

In the context of environmental art, however, the countervailing tensions of affective poetics and public accessibility have become more problematic since the question of the need for a public response to rapid environmental change is becoming unavoidable. Hence, we now face a cultural climate in which on the one hand, there is the kind of publicly accessible environmental art that speaks clearly to a wide range of people, but is often subject to didacticism or well-intentioned banality. And, on the other, the more aesthetically sophisticated works of poetic imagination, which are nonetheless sometimes seen as eliding the ethical imperatives of publicly communicating the findings of science in an age of heightened environmental risk (Williams, 2013/14:20).

Williams (2013/14) observed, however, that from the early 21st century there have been a number of major exhibitions that have drawn greater public attention to what she calls the slow art of imaginative persuasion rather than fast art with accessible environmental messages: “That is to say, towards art that is perhaps slow to reach a wider public, yet resonates for some time in the mind and feelings, and hence may have longer, and deeper, effects” (Williams, 2013/14:23). Importantly, it is assumed that the deeper effects of environmental art, in particular slow art, could encompass not only raising awareness of environmental issues but also transformation of socio-cultural values, individual world-views, and even culturally specific cosmologies.

Williams pointed out that one of the most difficult challenges ecological art faces is to develop strategies for confronting the relentless anthropocentrism of climate discourse. She further noted that ecological art has begun to develop the strategies “in ways that have contributed to a slow, and very gradual cultural shift in how the world might be conceived as an interdependent global system incorporating both human and non-human ecologies” (Williams, 2013/14:27).

However, Williams does not specify the strategies that can be easily applied to my art practice.

To develop strategies for socio-cultural shift, it is necessary not just to recognise the contemporary capitalistic culture as unsustainable, but to look into the roots of the unsustainable culture. Only when an artist can identify a cause of some crisis, she can develop an effective artistic strategy to address the problem.

The roots of the culture of unsustainability

Discussion about the roots of the culture of unsustainability is beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient to point out that there are many discussions about the roots and formation of the contemporary culture of unsustainability, which has resulted in a number of supposed origins being pointed out (Davis & Turpin, 2015). It is generally recognised that it is the formation of capitalism, which lies at the root of much of Western modernity, that continues to push the world towards environmental catastrophe (Kagan, 2011; Vitkus, 2014).

At the same time, many authors engage in a critique of modernism. In a deconstructive analysis of their world-view, they often realise that the roots of some of these crises can be traced to not just the rise of Western modernity but also basic Western concepts, in particular its attitude to nature. Nature has been objectified, estranged from humans, and exploited as a resource. For instance, Demos (2016) designates European colonialism as a regime not limited to the governing of peoples but also the structuring of nature. Nature, the nonhuman world, has been colonised in the capitalist economy to maximise the possibilities of resource exploitation.

Historically, the development of objectifying nature is associated with the rise of humanism in the European Renaissance of the 14th-17th centuries. Nature was no longer “something to be feared or revered but studied, understood, tamed, shaped to human will - and made to work” (Brown, 2014: 9). In particular, Demos (2016) points out that the colonisation of nature emerged from the Enlightenment principles of Rene Descartes’ concept of dualism between human and nonhuman worlds.

Non-Western cultures and contemporary culture

While many argue that the origin of the objectification of nature occurred in the early modernities with the wide range of social and cultural transformation in the 16th and 17th centuries, some authors interestingly argue that it may be necessary to look further back in history to understand the differences in cosmologies between Western culture and Indigenous cultures. Matilsky, for instance, suggests a need to reconsider the Bible, noting that the Bible proclaimed Man’s divinely-given domination over the earth, and was often used to justify nature’s brutal exploitation (1992:14). Kawai similarly points out that an analysis of the Bible and myths, focusing on the creation of the universe, can reveal the roots of cultural differences. Kawai stresses that the origin of cultural differences lies in the story of Creation, stating that for Semitic people there is a clear distinction between the Creator and the created. On the contrary, in Japanese mythology, as in several other cultures, the beginning of the world is described as a kind of spontaneous generation (Kawai, 1994 & 2016).

This discussion on contemporary Western culture and non-Western cultures suggests that, on the one hand, there may be a potentially huge gap between the two cultures, and that, on the other hand, the non-Western cultures may offer some inspirations in the development of artistic strategies to transform cultural values or even world-views.

In fact, Matilsky (1992:5) states that the relationship of the first people to their environment offers industrialised cultures important lessons in communication, and psychological and social integration, with nature. In Indigenous cultures, nature often centres the members of a group by providing necessary boundaries of behaviour, as well as access to the sacred realms of enlightenment. While mere idealisation of Indigenous cultures has been condemned, embracing them in art practice has generated not only fascination (Abeledo & Cruz, 2016) but also effective preservation of nature, as mentioned above in such a work as Forest Law (2014) by Biemann and Tavare.

Japanese culture and contemporary culture

Although there is much literature which claims that Japanese religious tradition not only appreciates the beauty of nature but even accords it a sacred value (Earhart, 1970), the number of artists who have incorporated elements of Japanese traditional culture into contemporary environmental art is rather scarce. However, such an approach has been successfully adopted by a couple of internationally renowned artists, Hayao Miyazaki & Haruki Murakami. In their stories, characters often come across a different-dimension world that is to be understood from the Shinto perspective that is rooted in the Jomon period of Japan (14,000-300 BC) (Shore, 2013; Wirth, 2018).

In particular, some of Miyazaki's works with their often veiled efforts to transform values, share with environmental art the attribution as a vehicle of message.

Ikebana and my practice

Similarly, environmental aesthetics and cosmology in Japanese traditional art such as Ikebana may offer alternative perspectives in considering strategies for sustainability. Although there are many Ikebana and other artists who have attempted to combine Western and Eastern traditions in their works, they often end up as superficial imitations or parodies, with very few artists having been able to combine them at a profound level. Hiroshi Teshigahara's bamboo installations (1980-2001) present one of these rare examples (Shimbo, 2013). Hiroshi, as an Ikebana artist, investigated the traditional notions of the relationship between Ikebana and nature in the context of contemporary installation and its site specificity.

In the 16th century, at an early stage of the development of Ikebana, it was defined as symbolic representation of nature. It was developed to an art form encompassing spiritual training in the pursuit of the harmonious coexistence between human and nature, regarding human as part of nature. It was the Ikebana reform movement in the 1930s under the influence of the Western modernism, that declared Ikebana merely as art, and denied any moral spiritual connections, and contemporary Ikebana is still under the reform.

However, a re-examination of the premodern values of Ikebana might bring it into line with the aims of environmental art. My research looks into how a premodern Japanese world-view can be incorporated into my practice as a sculptor with Ikebana training, to question or hopefully transform values and aesthetic sensibility. The following section discusses some of my recent works as a progress report rather than as a result of my research.

Wye River Project (2016)

In December 2015, lightning started a fire in the Otway Ranges on the west coast of Victoria, Australia. On Christmas Day, that fire tore through the communities of Wye River and Separation Creek, destroying 116 homes, one third of the homes in the communities. The Lorne Sculpture Biennale, a significant regional art event in Victoria, was extended into Wye River in March 2016 "not only for the potential economic boost of bringing visitors to the townships, but also for the community to come together in celebration to experience a unique process of creative renewal" (Lorne Sculpture website). The Wye River project was supported by the local communities as well as by Creative Victoria, the Victorian state government body responsible for the creative industries.

Spiral (Fig. 1) and Arch on the Wye River beach are tributes to the families and communities ravaged by the bushfires. While Arch was created from burnt wood from the houses, Spiral used mostly items that were once a part of everyday life for families living in this beautiful area.

They are a reminder that we are powerless before the full force of nature, something often forgotten in our civilised world. The fragility of our relationship with the environment is another theme running through this work, but more than anything I wanted to express the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, and the certainty that new homes will rise from the ashes.

Although they may not address eco issues directly, nor possess the apparent positive remedial effects on the environment, they imply environmental issues on a number of levels. First, they are recycled works created by wastes from a bushfire.

Figure 1: *Spiral (Detail)*, 2016. Mixed media. 800 x 100 x 800cm.

Next, as site specific artworks, they were connected to, and inseparable from, their environmental, historical and cultural contexts. Although bushfires are an essential part of the ecology of Australia, they have caused property damage and loss of human life. Global warming is thought to be increasing the frequency and severity of bushfires. In these contexts, special attention needs to be paid to my works, particularly in terms of their medium and forms.

Medium

The materials I collected from the damaged houses were not usual wastes. In many assemblages using recycled materials or junk, the original meanings of each unit is preserved in the final outcome to produce new meanings. As Waldman (1992) pointed out, a strong feature of assemblage is that collage makes it possible to layer into a work of art several levels of meaning: “the original identity of the fragment or objects and all the history it brings with it; the new meaning it gains in association with other objects or elements; and the meaning it acquires as the result of its metamorphosis into a new entity” (Waldman, 1992:11).

Due to severe heat, however, all the materials I used had been transformed into something ambiguous and often ethereal. Burnt and broken timbers, melted rubbish bins, and darkened and bent pipes, etc., are sometimes hard to recognise, their original forms losing their everyday appearance. They show not just how severe the fire was, but also in their unforeseen forms reveal their intensified essence left after the cleansing of the fire. They are in a sense like flower materials in Ikebana. In using natural materials, Ikebana artists cut, remove unnecessary elements, and bend each material, transforming its original natural feature forms into more abstract objects, liberating it from its older associations and revealing the essence of each material. Through such a cleansing process, the flower is ready for a new configuration.

In assembling the wastes, I treated each material as if it was a flower, focusing on its form and movement, emphasising unique features of each material. In Ikebana, creating a feeling of being alive through expressing how the energy of life flows is a crucial factor to achieve an idealised nature in the arrangements. In the same way, I arranged the materials to form a spiral shape expressing the flow of life, attempting to give a life to my work.

Form

The choice of spiral form as the main design feature for both works was rather natural. The symbolism of fire is often associated with creation and rebirth on the one hand, and destruction and purification on the other. Using materials after the fire, the emphasis in my works was rebirth. The spiral shape symbolises the natural living energy that runs through all creation. It is a visualisation of universal life: rebirth, growth and progress.

The spiral is regarded as one of the important elements in ecosystems by Weintraub, who states that “Eco aesthetics offers artists the opportunity to emulate the Earth’s inherent pattern of efficient design - the spiral” (2012:37). As artists who investigate the spiral form, Weintraub (2012) mentions Mario Merz (1925-2003) and Andy Goldsworthy (1956-). While Merz attempted to highlight “harmony with the patterns of the universe, and thereby reinvigorate the human spirit” (Weintraub, 2012:98), Goldsworthy created a spiral form which, despite inherent in nature, could never exist without human intervention. Although Goldsworthy’s approach of using natural materials to create simple forms appears to be similar to Ikebana, I have noted that his emphasis was what humans can do to nature rather than what nature can be. His works reveal, rather than a second nature, the human mind working with natural materials, creating forms through their conscious selection and manipulation (Shimbo, 2012). Contrary to that, my Spiral was my attempt to create a second nature, an organic form using non-organic materials, which is in line with Japanese gardens or Ikebana. It has been one of my concerns in the process of creation whether such an approach is valid in the context of contemporary art.

As the process of creation was open to the public over one month, I was able to interact with many people who visited the site.

Some of them shared their experiences with a bushfire, offered coffee, and helped arrange an automobile to transport materials from the hilly sites to the beach. It was encouraging to receive many comments that confirm the notion that art has a healing power.

Whale's Stomach (2017)

In June 2017, a dying whale was found in Norway with over 30 plastic bags in its stomach. That was one of several similar environmental disasters. The interior of this sculpture is created from plastic waste that is often found in oceans. This work serves as a reminder of how damaging human impact can be on the environment.

Unlike Jordan's Midway: Message from the Gyre (2009-2013), that has a similar motif, this work may not be as direct or distressing. The form of Whale's Stomach (Fig. 2) is nothing like the actual biological form of a whale's stomach. It is an imaginary abstract form. But does that make the impact of this work less? Dr Ewen Jarvis, curator of Yering Station Sculpture Exhibition, answered the question as follows:

"Viewing Shoso Shimbo's sculpture Whale's Stomach for the first time, I was initially arrested by the work's ungainly bulk, for its outsize dimensions certainly contribute to its presence, and following on from this initial impression was an acute awareness of the synthetic blue, plastic interior of the sculpture (having as it does the same hue and luminosity as certain poisonous sea creatures like box jellyfish, blue-ringed octopuses and blue dragon sea slugs). This correspondence of colour immediately worked to put my senses on the alert while foregrounding an important realisation: that the deadliest venoms produced by nature pale in comparison to the increasing tonnage of poisonous plastic wste mankind commits to the earth's oceans and waterways each day. This, in turn, caused me to reflect upon the fact that the medium of Whale's Stomach is central to the work's meaning, i.e. in a very visceral way, an environmental message is delivered powerfully to the viewer. Whales, of course, face many dangers that are a direct result of human activity. The artist would, of course, have been aware that during the creation of this sculpture not only were whales being washed up on beaches with stomachs full of plastic bags, but the Japanese military were also beginning to supply whalers with hardware enabling them to thwart the efforts of envi ronmentalists. As such, Whale's Stomach appeared at a relevant time for viewers to consider the implications of both openly violent acts against whales and less direct but equally destructive acts of environmental pollution. The end result of Shoso Shimbo's work is a bright-hued mass that nonetheless communicates a dark message from the deep."

Figure.2. Whale's Stomach, 2017. Mixed media. 150 X 150 X 250cm.

Keeper of Water: Storm Water Filtering Dam (2018)

Originally inspired by Daniel McCormick's watershed sculpture and Hans Haacke's Rhinewater Purification Plant (1972), this project is a small-scale environmental sculpture using organic materials. It not only symbolises a desire to protect our waterways but also aims to produce ecological benefits. The function of this kind of organic dam is to slow, filter and cleanse the flush water through sand, charcoal and willow branches before it joins the river. Being made of organic and biodegradable materials, the sculpture would eventually become a part of its environment. This project would encourage community members to join in the creation of the work, learning how to recycle unwanted natural material into a practical solution to an environmental problem.

Figure. 3 (Top): Keeper of Water: Storm Water Filtering Dam, 2018. Mixed media. 80 X 150 X 650cm.

Figure. 4 (Bottom): Sea Snakes: Trash Vortexes, 2018. Mixed media. 150 X 150 X 200cm (each of four pieces).

Sea Snakes: Trash Vortexes (2018)

A colourful mass of plastic floating in oceans may have some aesthetic appeal, but the floating debris is not just dangerous to wildlife but, indirectly, has an adverse effect on our own health as the toxins found in plastic make their way up the food chain to our own plates. The problem of plastic pollution has become ubiquitous in our oceans, with 90% of sea birds consuming some kind of plastic, and over eight million tons of new plastic rubbish finding its way into the oceans every year.

This sculpture is made of a number of ropes made of plastic bags and wire. Ropes in ancient Japanese culture are a metaphor for snakes, which are a symbol of rebirth. Such a notion about snakes are notably common to many indigenous cultures. While the environmental problem of floating plastic may seem beyond our control, my hope is that, like the snake, we can shed our old skin and find a solution to the plastic problem in our new incarnation.

A small-scale educational and participatory element was implemented in this project. In the process of making this work, some secondary students were encouraged to join, bringing plastic bags from home to recycle and engaging in a discussion about environmental problems with the artist.

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