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## Repairing the Social Landscape: The Artist as Activist

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## Repairing the Social Landscape: The Artist as Activist

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities

### Comments

This paper was originally presented at the FATE 2009 Conference in Portland, OR. | <http://foundations-art.org/index.html>.

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# Repairing the Social Landscape: The Artist as Activist<sup>1</sup>

Terry O'Day, Pacific University

## Introduction

My name is Terry O'Day. My background is in the crafts and I teach ceramics at Pacific University, a private liberal arts school in the town of Forest Grove about 25 miles west of Portland. Enrollment is about 3000 students and is evenly split between the undergraduate and graduate programs. There are about 20,000 Forest Grove residents and the k-12 school system consists of 7 elementary schools, 1 middle school, and 1 high school. I've been teaching and living in this environment for 10 years. \*

During that time, I've co-founded a sustainability-themed k-12 charter school that uses experiential, place - based pedagogies; \* founded a permaculture demonstration project to support education for sustainability at all age levels; \* and worked in various capacities within the college to develop administrative structures, programming, and courses that support education for sustainability at the college level. While I've presented this work in a variety of disciplinary venues, what I'd like to do today is share with you from an artist's perspective how I ended up working this way and how I connect these projects to my practice as an artist. Finally, I'd like to share a few examples of student work from the eco-art course that I teach. \*

## Why Sustainability?

"Sustainability" is the hot new buzzword of the day. \* Messages to buy sustainable products abound and the media is producing a flood of articles, books, and even movies on the problems we face and how to address them. All this activity can lead to a perception that "sustainability" is just another fad that will soon run its course. Yet the problem is real – concerns about climate change, peak oil, and food and water security are the drivers of the popular buzz, and there is a clear need for the educational establishment to address these concerns. \* As Alan AtKisson, president of an international sustainability consultancy firm puts it: "*We cannot go on, and we cannot stop. We must transform.*" \*

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## **Transformation: Easier Said than Done**

Nothing short of a grand scale shift in thinking\* will spare us from the more disastrous consequences of our collective behavior which, according to some scientists, may even include human extinction by the end of the century. While this is still viewed as an extreme prediction by most, there is general agreement in the scientific community that swift change is necessary to prevent a deterioration of global conditions.

If it is true that a profound transformation of behaviors is necessary, how can that shift be precipitated? \* Certainly strong leadership and wise policy-making at the upper levels of government are necessary. But this approach may not be as effective as it needs to be. \* As Einstein puts it:

*"You can't solve the problems you created using the thinking that created them".*

In his book "The Bridge at the End of the World," James Gustave Speth also suggests that change cannot be initiated from within the current political and economic system and offers ample evidence from his 40 years of work as a policy advisor and environmentalist to support his view. Instead, he and others suggest that an appeal to values, beliefs, and philosophies through intuitive and subjective modes of communication may be a more effective way to achieve the shift in consciousness that is needed. \*

To support this conclusion, brain-imaging studies (from the rather disturbing field of "neuroeconomics") have shown that the brain relies on emotions rather than intellect in its decision-making processes. An article in Science Magazine describes a brain study that showed vigorous activity in areas of the brain that govern emotion when subjects were asked to make decisions. Because of the urgent need to make immediate decisions, it seems appropriate to turn to disciplines that are effective in presenting information in ways that affect the emotional centers of our brain.

Of all our disciplines, the ones most associated with the production of work that appeals to our emotions typically fall within the arts. \* Artists are highly skilled at evoking powerful responses from their selected audiences through the manipulation of both

verbal and non-verbal cues. And there are a growing number of artists who are responding to the above-mentioned problems by creating work that both elucidates these problems in ways that are emotionally charged, and, more importantly, offers suggestions for effective action as a way to channel the emotional response they have provoked. \*

Though much of this work easily fits within commonly accepted art forms such as painting and sculpture, some of it challenges our conception of what art is. Artists working in collaboration with scientists, government agencies, and community members produce such things as scientific research, parks, and proposals for urban development. Though initially these artworks tended to focus on natural landscapes, the genre is rapidly expanding to include actions that shape the social landscape as well. As an example, my current work seeks to create conditions that promote a shift in perception regarding the human relationship to environment through interventions in educational systems. Though this statement might not seem to describe the typical art practice, this new work is firmly grounded in foundational art precepts and grows directly out of my 30 years of experience as a practicing artist, craftsperson, and educator. \*

### **A Personal Journey: From Artist to Activist**

After receiving my MFA in Metals, I worked for 15 yrs as a professional craftsperson producing jewelry and glass for the high-end craft market. Outside of the business, I produced small art objects for exhibit in museum and gallery settings.

Once I began teaching, I was able to see my work in a different context than I had when I was a working artist. Given the magnitude of the problems we face, the work I had been doing began to seem small, self-centered, and irrelevant. As Luck One, a popular hip-hop artist put it: "*Art is too impactful of a tool to be squandered on empty things such as narcissism and ignorance*". With this in mind, I questioned both the venue and format of my work and wondered if there was something I could do to speak to a wider audience. And as a new teacher, I thought a lot about the methods and goals of education and whether these were appropriate in light of the urgent need for change.

To help me sort out these thoughts, I made a series of drawings that explored our relationship to environment through the food system. Though the subject matter was a radical departure from my previous work, these were still drawings that needed to be exhibited in gallery-type spaces so I felt the need to go further. \*

In my search for understanding, I was heavily influenced by the writings of Joseph Beuys who described a form of artmaking that he called "social sculpture". In the words of Joan Rothfuss, curator at the Walker Art Center, Beuys' vision of social sculpture can be defined as follows: \*

*"Beuys imagined that an expanded application of human creativity-- and the broader definition of "art" that would follow--would result in something he called "social sculpture." While the term encompassed many things for Beuys, it might broadly be defined as a conscious act of shaping, of bringing some aspect of the environment--whether the political system, the economy, or a classroom--from a chaotic state into a state of form, or structure. Social sculpture should be accomplished cooperatively, creatively, and across disciplines... "*

Beuys himself states:

*"Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the death line: to dismantle in order to build 'A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART'.*

And that:

*"Art is a genuinely human medium for revolutionary change in the sense of completing the transformation from a sick world to a healthy one."*

Finally, Beuys says that:

*"Every human being is an artist... called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking and structures that shape and inform our lives".*

Considered as art, my new work fits this definition very well. Specifically, my work as

an artist is to create conditions that promote a shift in perception of relationship between natural and human systems and also to provoke actions to transform that relationship. As an example, in my view, \* the conditions in the traditional k-12 school make it impossible for people exposed to those conditions to achieve a new perception. Therefore, in order for understanding to occur, conditions in the school system must change. One way to change conditions\* is to start a new kind of school. Other approaches might be\* to develop an outdoor learning environment or administrative structures, programs, and courses that foster this shift in thought and action.

Each of my works focuses on a slightly different population and method but my purpose in each is to create a matrix that provides multiple opportunities for a community of creative doers and learners to make their own contributions towards achieving our common goals. My process consists of identifying individuals who can fill particular niches (such as leader, organizer, or communicator) in the "composition" I see forming. By acting as a collaborator, educator, motivator, supporter, and connector, I bring these isolated elements into relationship around a central purpose.

Once this community is activated, I am free to either leave the project or take on a different role within it. Either way, my role as artist is ended when the conditions have been created that allow the new entity to exist on its own. \* In some ways, my changing role in these projects recalls the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles who asked the question "what makes art Art" in her work "I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day (1976). In this piece, Ukeles asked the maintenance staff in a bank to document their work as "art" and "not art" at different times of the day. Viewers were asked to consider whether a mundane activity could become art through the intention of the person doing the work. For me, the line between "art" and "not art" is very clear when I am working on these projects. I am an artist making art when I am envisioning and creating new social structures and environments. Once the structures or environments are in place, I am no longer the creator of a work but a participant in it.

As artists, our first love is our work; by re-framing art practice to include social actions, we can become effective change agents within our community. Because of their format,

my current works reach a wider audience and have a larger impact than any of my previous work ever has. For example, \* at the Community School, over two hundred students, their parents, and the staff are immersed in the alternative experience that the work was intended to create on a daily basis for a period of up to 12 years. And, because my focus as an artist has been on the development of a dynamic organization populated by highly motivated individuals with specific skills, interests, and aptitudes, this work is adaptive and will grow and adjust so that it continually challenges those who come into contact with it even as world conditions change. \*

### **Eco-art: An Alternative Approach to Environmental Education**

Artists play a different role in society than do scientists, policy-makers, and designers. Through their work, artists can capture imagination, generate excitement, and project vision in inventive, exciting, and compelling ways. Students with a strong foundation in ecological and social knowledge who are presented with the work of these artist activists understand the effectiveness of this approach and see its transformative potential. Given opportunity and information, these students learn to creatively express their thoughts in ways that have both practical and revolutionary value.

In the eco-art course I teach, we explore the idea of the artist as change agent rather than as agents of the marketplace. Other topics include audience identification, modes of expression, documentation, and presentation. In addition, we review the historical record of artists working in this genre. During the course, students complete an individual work, a group installation, and a class project.

Though it is challenging to present a conceptually based art form to students who have no art experience, I chose not to put prerequisites on the course because I wanted a diverse representation of skills, knowledge, and maturity in the class. Students are encouraged to use whatever media they are most comfortable with and projects have ranged from animated film shorts to Goldsworthy-like stick and leaf constructions to large group performances and guerilla-art installations. All are discussed in terms of message, audience, and effectiveness.

## **Student Work: Midnight Madness**

Following is a description of work created by some students taking the course. As unsanctioned artworks on campus, some of these installations also functioned to question the authority of the institution to control and direct comment by students on these issues: \*

“Plastic Impact” incorporated 1,347 plastic shopping bags tied together to form a chain that was then strung through the trees across campus. A text was posted with the piece, informing viewers that the display was a visual demonstration of the refuse generated should each student in the school’s undergraduate college use a single shopping bag. The project took over two weeks to assemble and involved an unknown number of students working secretly in collaboration.

“Leaf Labyrinth” similarly used the trees on campus, here with their leaf “waste” sculpted into a labyrinth form, which spread throughout the trees and meandered across walkways, thereby encouraging walkers to consider a less direct route to their destinations.

“Moss Graffiti” was a guerilla action also performed in the dead of night. The moss took hold and grew for several months before facilities personnel eradicated the images.

“Rush Hour Intervention” was a performance piece enacted at a Metro train stop during the rush hour commute. While working, the student answered questions from passers by about what she was doing and why with the intention of calling attention to the contrast between the sterile and dark train station and the vibrant color outdoors. \*

## **Conclusion**

It seems astonishing to me that, even though we are on the brink of an environmental destabilization that has the potential to radically alter life on earth and, even though we are in an age of media saturation with unprecedented access to information, so few seem to realize or care that we are in such a tenuous position. What approaches can we develop that will cause people to change their behaviors and galvanize them into

positive action? How can we paint a picture of a future that assumes environmentally friendly behaviors that doesn't also seem frightening to people? How can we make people aware of our extreme condition without pitching them into the depths of depression? As artists, we are skilled at creating works that evoke emotional responses, alter perceptions, and even generate actions from our audiences. By refocusing our art practice and developing new teaching approaches, we can become effective change agents in our institutions and our communities.