

CALLED TO ACTION: ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION PROJECTS BY ARTISTS

Lillian Ball, Curator

CALLED TO ACTION presents works by artists who not only comment upon environmental issues, but actually intercede to halt degradation and nurture environmental health. They are passionately involved in processes that restore different ecosystems worldwide. They question assumptions about what is possible, and work with scientists, government officials and planners to bring their visions to fruition. These works aim to escape the confines of the “white box” and actually influence policy. Spanning the generations, artists included range from respected pioneers such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles to William Meyer III, who recently graduated from the NY Botanical Gardens School of Landscape Design. From several diverse backgrounds, these artists have been affected by conditions and inspired by an urgent need to address environmental destruction. That is why I consider the artists in this exhibition to be “called to action”.

In the beginning of my work as an activist on wetland preservation and restoration, art just seemed superfluous. It gradually dawned on me that the only artwork I could make had to concentrate on environmental issues. The underlying concepts of community values and science had become indispensable to the success of the visual object. Amy Lipton told me about a listserve of international artists working this way called the Ecoart Network and their definition hit home. Quoting from the ecoart network website, this work “focuses attention on the web of interrelationships in our environment – the physical, biological, cultural, and historical aspects of ecological systems”. These working methods reflect principles of “Social Sculpture” established by the artist Joseph Beuys, one of the founders of the Green Party in the 70’s. His ideas about community involvement and activism using art as a vehicle are echoed by many. This exhibition has been a wonderful opportunity for me to research the restoration work done by other artists and to learn from their experiences what strategies have been most effective. It is essential to acknowledge the wide range of significant work being done in this field today.

Sometimes the artists’ projects have been commissioned, but often the inspiration comes from an intimate connection with the local circumstances. As Richard Kirk Mill tells it, his involvement in the Teaneck Creek Conservancy grew out of the fact that the site was in the neighborhood where he lives, literally in his own backyard. The photo collages of Aviva Rahmani connect imperiled sites from her restoration of the town dump where she lives in Vinalhaven, Maine to Riverhead’s waterfront and on to areas around the globe. The Santa Fe River Basin project came about when longstanding innovators, Newton and Helen Harrison, revisited an area in New Mexico where they had taught many years ago and found the once flowing river nearly gone.

Much of the work requires viewer participation to fully appreciate it. Some pieces are technically new media, while others use deceptively simple means to full impact. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, a leader in art / community interface, who worked to raise esteem for NYC Sanitation employees in the 70’s, has been artist in residence at the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island for several years. Her 6 channel video piece with Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra combines actual footage of the landfill, interviews with city officials and biologists, and her plans for future wetland restoration. An Argentine collaborative group, Ala Plastica, presents images that guide viewers through the multi-faceted cultural forces surrounding the cleanup of a 1999 oil spill in the Rio de la Plata community.

Other artists also work in ways that encourage outside participation during the full process, from initial research to the finished art piece. Jackie Brookner and Mel Chin have used plants to remove toxins from water and soil and often work with scientists or policy makers. Mel Chin’s ground breaking *Revival Field* project sparked controversy with NEA funding. Jackie Brookner’s public art projects prove that biological methods work just as well as chlorine or chemicals to keep water clean. Stacy Levy, sculptor and Julie Bargman, landscape architect, collaborated to use plantings to help in the restoration of a coalmining site, as well as to show the visual progress of the process. While photographing early one morning, a white rooster led Hope Sandrow to a Scandinavian Lodge and 13 acre estate that she is now working to preserve with the Town of Southampton. Reiko Goto Collins and

Tim Collins worked with hydrologists, botanists and planners to make an ecological design plan and water quality report that analyzed alternatives in the 3 Rivers area of Pennsylvania. Work this ambitious is truly interactive.

Art sites' grounds along the Peconic River offer an outdoor setting ripe for intervention. Bob Braine and Leslie Reed will invert local golf course landscaping and sod farming while reintroducing marshland plants. William Meyer is teaming up with Cornell University scientist Robert Kent to educate middle school students about plant communities in Long Island and to reconstruct a chosen native landscape at art sites. Both these projects, along with Aviva Rahmani's outdoor component will remain on view for the duration of the summer season.

The final aspect of the exhibition will be a roundtable discussion with architects, planners, landscape designers and scientists from the Eastern Long Island community. Discussion will explore public art perceptions, green building philosophies, and possible non-profit solutions. The ultimate purpose is to raise consciousness about the potential options suggested and to see if there are ways to integrate this kind of art with specific local applications.

Sustainable practices have to implement renewable energy, and lower CO2 emissions to control climate change. Brownfields can be restored, globally rare ecosystems can be preserved, and biodiversity can be maintained in the landscape. The artists in *CALLED TO ACTION* are creatively negotiating the fertile spaces in between disciplines to make these things possible. The ultimate goal is for the ideas in this exhibition to go out into the public domain, to stimulate active involvement and effect change through envisioning alternatives.

Lillian Ball, April 2007

Bio

Lillian Ball is an artist and environmental activist working in New York. Water imagery has been a constant subtext, but recent subject matter focuses specifically on environmental concerns. The current body of work, "Leap of Faith," uses photography and video installation to address the issues around an ongoing wetland preservation project on the North Fork of Long Island. She is currently developing interactive game installations such as *GO ECO*. Metaphorically based on the ancient Asian game of Go, this serious game uses video projections to encourage cooperation while guiding players through a wetland preservation process.

A multidisciplinary background in anthropology, ethnographic film, and sculpture inform her work. She has received numerous awards including a New York State Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Computer Arts, a John-Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in Visual Arts, and a National Endowment for the Arts Grant in Sculpture. She has exhibited internationally, and traveled widely. This year, an invitation to make a piece for a Swedish Embassy symposium resulted in a trip to Lapland above the Arctic Circle. Her new media installations have been exhibited recently at Groundworks: Environmental Collaboration in Contemporary Art at Carnegie Mellon University Gallery, *The Drop* at Exit Art in NYC, and in a solo shows, *Leap of Faith* at Art Sites, Riverhead, *GO ECO*, at the Queens Museum of Art.