

Transition of Environmental Art: In Search of Strategies for Sustainability

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

After briefing the complex historical transition of Environmental Art, this paper overviews the current state of Environmental Art focusing on its defining features and the way to classify its diversity. Although the functional appreciation of Environmental Art is effective in specifying strategies and attitudes of the artists in responding to the issues of environment, this paper questions such an approach in terms of its potential narrowness and oversimplification in interpretation.

As an alternative artistic approach to environment, this paper looks into the dealing of nature in some of the traditional Japanese art. While Japanese aesthetics epitomised in art forms such as Ikebana and Japanese gardens have been noted in the discourse of environmental aesthetics, not enough research on their proximity to the chiefly Western Environmental Art and their possible synthesising has been conducted.

This paper includes reflection of my own art practice as a contemporary Ikebana artist that investigated, focusing on the relationship between art and nature, a possibility of applying Ikebana principles in the context of Environmental Art.

Keywords: Environmental Art, Japanese aesthetics, Ikebana, Japanese gardens

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Introduction

Contemporary art generally corresponds imaginatively to the contemporary society and culture. Post war anxiety in the 1940s' gave rise to abstract expressionism and commodity abundance in the 1960s' is associated with pop art. In the current age of climate change and enhanced global warming, it is understandable that the significant number of contemporary artists engage in the range of work referred as Environmental Art (Kastner, 1998; Sanders, 1992). While many argue that its mission is becoming ever more crucial, the status of Environmental Art in the history of art is rather ambiguous. It is important to clarify its position as a potentially significant art moment and to examine the approaches and strategies that could be effective in addressing the current environmental issues from the vantage of a sustainable planet.

This study looks into some of significant developments of Environmental Art focusing on how selected artists have responded to the issues of environment specifying their approaches and strategies. Many studies classify some of their creative approaches focusing on whether they are making comments upon environmental issues, offering symbolic warnings and poetic meditation, or providing measurable environmental remedies. While acknowledging the effectiveness and simplicity of those studies emphasising the functional aspects of Environmental Art, this study suggests to reconsider its potential from broader perspectives.

This study also considers approaches of Environmental Art and its aesthetics in relation to Japanese aesthetics epitomised in art forms such as Ikebana and Japanese gardens. While Japanese attitude to nature is often noted in the discussion of environmental aesthetics, it has not been investigated sufficiently in the context of Environmental Art.

This paper concludes with a chapter of my reflection of my own public art project that investigated how art can respond to a natural disaster and can facilitate healing in the community, on one hand, and, focusing on the relationship between art and nature, whether Ikebana principles can be applicable and effective in the context of assemblage and Environmental Art, on the other. In essence this research looks into whether Ikebana, in its expanded fields, can be integrated into contemporary art, and be effective in particular as Environmental Art.

Environmental Art

Environmental Art is an overarching term and has been given a number of labels such as Land Art, Earthworks, Process Art, Eco-Art etc. As a number of surveys suggest, environmental art is a wide art movement that encompass a variety of different interactions, concepts and methodologies (Kastner, 1998; Moyer & Harper, 2011; Thornes, 2008; Weintraub, 2012). It essentially describes an artistic process or artwork in which the artist actively engages with the natural or urban environment. A sub-genre of Environmental Art that focuses specifically on the inter-relationships between humans and nature is often referred to as ecological art or eco-art (Mark, Chandler & Baldwin, 2016). Today environmental art generally referred to artworks that possess an ecological dimension integral to them and that incorporate ecological and socio-ecological values and concerns (Thornes, 2008).

While the definition of Environmental Art is constantly changing, its development largely reflected the evolution of eco-thought (Kastner, 1998). It was in the 1960s that numerous artists conceived Environmental Art chiefly to oppose the commodification of the art market. One of its aims was to liberate art from confined settings in general but environmental concerns were not necessarily the core issues despite the fact that environmentalism was born at that time (Kastner, 1998; Moyer & Harper, 2011). Actually the practice of American Land Artists complements the ideas of conquest and exploration that characterised the industrial era, remaining loyal to anthropocentric perspectives, which interpret reality in terms of human values and experiences. It is notable that Richard Long, who is often regarded as one of the Environmental artists, has distanced himself from the pioneering earth artists.

My interest was in a more thoughtful view of art and nature, making art both visible and invisible, using ideas, walking, stones, tracks, water, time, etc, in a flexible way. It was the antithesis of so-called American 'Land Art', where an artist needed money to be an artist, to buy real estate to claim possession of the land, and to wield machinery. True capitalist art (Thornes, 2008, p.402).

During the 1980s and 1990s the term installation art replaced Environmental Art to describe works of art that privilege an immersive experience over medium-specificity. Consequently in subsequent years the term has been associated with artists who pursue environmental and conservationist agendas. They generally meant to remedy damage rather than poeticise it. According to Wainwright (2006, p. 32), the transition from formalist-minimalist outdoor land art to work that actively incorporated social and ecological goals, both symbolically and literally was progressive.

Functionality of Environmental Art: Features and Classification

It is a rather unique aspect of Environmental Art that much of its literature focuses on its functional aspects. 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, p. 85)

Actually focusing on the effectiveness of Environmental Art on environmental issues reveals to be useful not only in classifying the art works but also in identifying the defining features of it, although it certainly has limitations, which will be discussed shortly in this study.

As to the essential elements of Environmental Art, Weintraub (2012) presents an appropriate proposal. Eco-art is regarded as a subcategory of Environmental Art in this study, but for some authors including Weintraub (2012) and Sanders (1992) it seems to be synonym to Environmental Art or the chief part of it. Weintraub (2012, p. 7) suggested that eco-art's defining features can be constructed out of the following four attributes:

1. Topic identifies the dominant idea and determines the work's material and expressive components.
2. Interconnections apply to the relationships between the physical constructs of a work of art and between the work of art and context in which it exists.
3. Dynamism emphasises actions over objects, and changes over ingredients.
4. Ecocentrism guides thematic interpretations as well as decisions regarding the resources consumed and the wastes generated at each juncture of the art process.

Ecocentric perspective, mentioned at the final point, refers to the principle that humans are not more important than other entities on Earth. It is the opposite of anthropocentric and envisions humans as components of interconnected systems. Such a new perspective seems to certainly be

a defining feature of Eco Art. But Weintraub (2012) noted that no single work epitomises all four attributes, and no attribute alone conveys the range of eco art's thematic and material components.

Classifying environmental artworks based on their functionality from the artworks where ecological concerns are symbolic to those where they are more literal is inevitably provisional but is useful particularly in gaining its overview quickly. Wainwright roughly categorised actual environmental art into the following five groups (Wainwright, 2012, p. 36):

1. Figurative environment: artist aims at creating a social/psychological or cultural environment. e.g. Diller + Scofidio, *Blur Building* (2002).
2. Traditional fine arts and traditional representational land art such as landscape painting and photography. Some recycle art and botanical arts are also included. e.g. Leo Sewell, *Teddy Bear*.
3. Site-specific public art works. e.g. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Kathryn Gustafson, Jaime Baer, & Conger Moss Guillard, *Wind Sound and Movement* (2001).
4. Artworks that function as commentary on the state of the environment or as symbolic ecological restoration. e.g. Ken Yonetani, *Fumie Tiles* (2004).
5. Artworks as ecological restoration that often have a practical, measurable function. e.g. Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield A Confrontation* (1982), Louis G. LeRoy, *Ecocathedral*.

As Wainwright admits, this categorisation is not comprehensive nor exhaustive. Each category, particularly 2 and 3, is so broad that this categorisation is almost meaningless without making simultaneous reference to the defining features of Environmental Art such as eco art's four attributes suggested by Weintraub (2012, p. 7): topics, interconnection, dynamism, and ecocentrism. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for the illustrative purpose of overviewing the current state of Environmental Art.

Some concerns over functional appreciation of Environmental Art

While it is convenient to look at Environmental Art from the functional point of view, such an approach raises some issues. First, this may oversimplify Environmental Art, overlooking other interpretive potential of each artwork.

Historically many fields of science have inspired artists. Robertson and McDaniel (2013) observed increasing number of cross-fertilisation of ideas between art and science today

in particular in the field of life science, including biochemistry, molecular biology, genetics, and neuroscience. They specify typical but varied attitudes of artists toward science as follow:

Artists respond metaphorically and impressionistically to scientific images and discoveries. They examine scientific topics with playfulness and skepticism, enchantment and wariness, and, perhaps most important, they view the practice of art itself as a field of research inquiry, a sort of alternative science, in the spirit of the pioneering twentieth-century artist Marcel Duchamp, whose interest in physics (and chess) is well documented and whose own art works simulated scientific inquiry while exploring human sexuality and other subjects (Robertson & McDaniel, 2013, p. 289).

Various attitudes of artists to science echoed with numerous imaginative and open-ended ways of interpretation of their artworks. When art meets ecology in Environmental Art, however, it tends to be interpreted from comparatively narrower ranges of perspectives focusing on its remedial or educational functions.

Secondly, the functional approach to Environmental Art may overemphasise and over evaluate its functionality. On the one hand, a positive outlook of Environmental Art even leads to such an optimistic claim as “Ecological aestheticism, which combines visually striking artistic practice with environment remediation, provides art with a functional springboard to promote a brighter, more environmentally friendly future” (Wiley, 2011, Appendix B). However, Wainwright (2006) offers a more realistic observation about the current state of Environmental Art in term of its functionality.

Only a small percentage of environmental and eco-activist artworks are functionally and literally ecological in content; the ecological dimension of the majority of these works is symbolic or focused on social-environmental awareness. Additionally, many environmental artworks are quite traditional: works of photography, painting, recycle sculpture etc. Finally, of the works that are literally and functionally ecological in scope, they are typically on a scale too small to have any real ecological impact and/or they are temporary and so their ability to literally affect meaningful, quantifiable ecological changes is nil. (Wainwright, 2006, p. 106)

If functional values of Environmental Art are overemphasised, above the observation may disappoint some viewers who consequently may regard it as ineffective or insignificant. Environmentally remedial art forms are certainly noteworthy but overemphasis of them would limit the possibility of Environmental Art.

Third, the functional approach to Environmental Art may oversimplify art itself. Incorporating ecological features in developing designs is prevalent in wide fields today including architecture, landscape architecture and commercial products (Kinney, 2012). However, it may not work in the same way in combining art and ecology. Wainwright (2006) seems to be aware that such combination is not easily achieved and pointed out that the existing theories of aesthetics are not able to cater for the whole range of Environmental Art, in particular what she calls eco-activist art. She then tries to develop a new theory of aesthetics combining those of Carlson and Eaton to encompass eco-activist art. While it is beyond the scope of this study to address all of the above concerns directly and in detail, the following discussion about my practice will inevitably imply those issues.

Contemporary art and Ikebana

Following rather oversimplified comment by Weintraub (2012) on an aspect of contemporary art would be suffice to suggest how difficult it is to position contemporary Ikebana in the post-modern art.

A great turning point in the history of Western art occurred in the Twentieth Century when art's association with beauty first received pummellings from the cubists, futurists, and Dadaists and then was practically exterminated by pop, conceptual, minimal, fluxus, art povera, happenings, and land artists. During these years, those who remained loyal to the goal of achieving beauty were often banished to the outposts of provincialism (Weintraub, 2012, p. 33).

One of the contemporary artists who "remained loyal to the goal of achieving beauty" is certainly Andy Goldsworthy. Among the Environmental Artists, with whom he frequently communicated, he says that he often creates "works of transcendent beauty" (Lubow, 2005) using natural materials. His artwork can be categorised in Group 2 in the above categorisation by Weintraub (2012). Hiroshi Teshigahara, who contributed to the expansion of the field of Ikebana, regarded Goldsworthy's works as nothing but Ikebana (Okabayashi, 1998; Shimbo, 2013). However, Wiley (2011, p. 71) and Thornes (2008, p. 403) noted the following comment on Goldsworthy's works: "populist decorativeness and a dewy-eyed sentimentalisation of nature". Many attempts to create Ikebana work in the context of contemporary art would fall into the same criticism or would be "banished to the outposts of provincialism" if they did not possess sculptural elements and concepts. In other words, it would be necessary to appreciate or incorporate the emphasis of Modern art on the shift toward the dematerialisation of art (Clark, 2010) or the idea-as-artwork (Gooding, 2002).

It was the same kind of difficulty that I had when I was commissioned to create artworks for the Wye River community in 2016. While recognising the proximity between Ikebana and Environmental Art, I had to be careful about how to integrate some of Ikebana elements into contemporary art. Surely Hiroshi Teshigahara was one of the forerunners who created elegant contemporary Ikebana works using sprit bamboo poles that are effective as contemporary installation and Environmental Art (Shimbo, 2013). However, my challenge this time was to use non-organic medium, damaged and burnt artificial objects after a bushfire.

Environmental aesthetics and Ikebana

As to eco art aesthetics, Weintraub (2012) generalised that eco artists are devising a new system of aesthetics to visualise how shapes, colours, and patterns distribute themselves within ecosystems. Their investigation includes "delving beneath surfaces of ecosystems to discern nature's design efficiencies", in other words, "scrutinising ecosystems to discover how their forms create patterns, how these patterns congeal into constructions, how these constructions comprise networks, and how these networks function as systems" (2012, p. 33). The eco artists who are trying to devise a new system of aesthetics may gain some inspiration in the approaches of some of Japanese arts toward nature, in particular towards the construction of Japanese gardens.

Carlson (2002), one of the pioneers in the field of environmental aesthetics, paid a special attention to Japanese gardens. While Carlson's book is often referred to in the discussion of Environmental Art and environmental aesthetics, his analysis of Japanese gardens has not been noted adequately. His insight into Japanese gardens is applicable not just to gardens but also to other art forms such as Ikebana and other fields of Japanese art.

While in French style gardens, according to Carlson (2002), harmonious relationships are achieved by art serving as a model for nature, in English style nature gardens harmonious relationships are achieved by nature serving as a model for art. On the other hand, in the topiary gardens as well as in environmental artworks by such artists as Smithson and Christo, Carlson recognises that there are clear dialectical and conflicting relationships between art and nature, and consequently that they are difficult to appreciate aesthetically. Carlson, however, finds a different approach in the creation of Japanese gardens in dealing with the problem of difficult and confusing aesthetic appreciation that accompanies such a relationship.

it (the Japanese garden) does so by following the lead of nature in the sense of making the artificial subservient to the natural. It employs the artificial in the creation of an idealised version of nature that emphasises the essential. It thereby achieves an appearance of inevitability - the look of something that could not have been otherwise - and in achieving this look, it, as pristine nature itself, rises above critical judgement (Carlson, 2002, p. 171).

In one sense, therefore, Japanese gardens may be an attempt to create idealised nature or second nature. Despite Carlson's insight, however, it may be too hopeful to assume that such an attitude is valid and immediately appreciated in the context of contemporary art. Nevertheless, my investigation includes applying some Ikebana approaches in creating ephemeral public art works as Environmental Art.

The Wye River Project

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 curated by Julie Collins, 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.

With the support of the local community, I travelled to Wye River over a period of a month, collecting material from the restricted area to create two works, Arch and Spiral on the Wye River Beach. These works 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 with these works that it is the triumph of the human spirit over adversity and the certainty that new homes will rise from the ashes that these works.

In terms of the five categorisations of Environmental Art proposed by Weintraub (2012), my works would belong to the groups 2, 3, and 4. Although they may not address eco issues directly nor possess the apparent positive remedial effects on the environment, they imply environmental issues in a number of levels. First, they can be perceived as recycled works created by wastes from a bushfire. Next, as site specific artworks, they were connected to and inseparable from their environmental, historical and cultural contexts. As certain native plants rely on bushfires as a means of regeneration, bushfires are an essential part of the ecology of Australia. Bushfires in Australia are frequent events mainly during summer that 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 term of their medium and forms.



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

Medium

The materials I collected from the damaged houses were not usual wastes. In many assemblages using recycled materials or junks, 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, p. 11).

Due to severe heat, however, all the materials I used have 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 natural it into more abstract objects liberating it from its older associations and revealing the essence of each materials. 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 the form, movement, emphasising unique features of each materials. In Ikebana creating a feeling of alive through expressing how energy of life flows is 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.

Figure 2. Arch, 2016. Burnt timbers & metal frames. 500 x 300 x 200 cm.

Forms

The choice of spiral form as the main design feature for the both works was rather natural. The symbolism of fire 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 symbolizes the natural living energy that runs through all creation. It is a visualization 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, p. 37). As the artists who investigate the spiral form, Weintraub (2012) mentioned 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, p. 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 human 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. Whether such an approach is valid in the context of contemporary art has been one of my concerns in the process of creation.

To further create a strong contrast with the burnt materials and convey a theme of rebirth, introduction of small portion of fresh foliage and floral materials were considered. I could have planted native vine plants along The Spiral and let them grow over a time and cover the whole work with green foliage. The work would be a metaphor of entropy, rebirth and the eternal cycle of universe. However, the conditions of the project did not allow this to happen. Instead, I conducted a half an hour Ikebana performance with a Japanese wadai-ko performance to add fresh flower arrangements to The Arch in front of hundreds of locals and visitors to the site to mark the completion of the project and the end of the Lorne Sculpture 2016.

As the process of creation was open to 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.

Conclusion

With a growing number of international artists engaging in Environmental Art rejuvenation of the planet, it might play a significant role in contemporary art and culture. This study found that a prevailing functional view of Environmental Art has been to overview and discern the various approaches and strategies. However, such a view might limit the potential of Environmental Art to further develop and to produce wider meanings. Reflecting on the author’s own public art project, this study suggests an alternative approach to Environmental Art that attempts to transfer some of the Ikebana principles in the crea-

tion of environmental artworks. With a certain insight into the relationship between environmental aesthetics and Japanese aesthetics, there would be some elements of Ikebana, in particular its attitudes to nature, which could contribute to the further development of Environmental Art.

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