

Creative Ecology: Art's Role in Addressing Environmental and Sustainability Issues in Australia

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Abstract

Art has embodied the relationship between humans and the natural environment throughout the ages. As this relationship changed, many artists began to address concerns about the ways humans interact with nature. Today, more than ever, there is a need for channels of communication to address the major environmental and sustainability problems of our time. This study examines how art is influenced by environmental and sustainability concerns and the ways in which it responds to such concerns. By investigating how artists, community organizations, festivals and other initiatives encourage public awareness about environmental and sustainability issues, the study explores art's role in modern Australian society. Through this investigation the study attempts to answer the question of how art can affect socio-cultural or political change.

This study was conducted through interviews with artists and directors of community organizations, festivals and research institutes. Also, the study included a survey of people attending an art exhibit. In order to find and establish contacts with these people, I began background research on the internet and in libraries and eventually visited three art exhibits focused on environmental and sustainability themes. In addition, I visited several community organizations and took part in a festival celebrating the environment and promoting sustainability through certain art initiatives. As the culmination of the study, I created an art piece to address my own concerns about environmental and sustainability issues.

Through these investigations, I found that art is informed and can educate people in many ways about particular difficulties in man's relationship with nature. Many artists address their individual concerns through art as a means of increasing their understanding of certain issues and/or healing feelings of anxiety. Although art is generally passive it has the ability to connect with people on emotional and subliminal levels, sometimes inspiring a heightened appreciation for nature or reevaluation of human progress. Also, creative projects can bring many people together, encouraging discussion about community concerns and possible solutions to environmental and sustainability issues. This kind of engagement gives art a particular advantage over other forms of communication. Ultimately, this study proves that there is an important role for art in society in educating and communicating between people significant concerns about the environment and sustainability. Art can assist in the transition toward a more environmentally conscious, sustainable society.

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Common Abbreviations

ERIA – Environmental Research Institute for Art
MUMA – Monash University Museum of Art
MDBC – Murry-Darling Basin Commission
NSW – New South Wales
PETA – Primary English Teaching Association

3. Introduction

3.1 Art and Society

Since the dawn of human civilization, art has been used to convey histories, traditions, and fears of the mysteries of the universe in societies around the world. Individuals and groups of people have come together to create works of art that have stood the tests of time and preserved cultural histories for future generations to see. In this way, art not only communicates between people within and across societies, it also communicates across time. Artist Joseph Beuys once said, “All human knowledge comes from art; the concept of science has evolved from creativity. And so it is that the artist alone is responsible for historical awareness; what counts is to experience the creative factor in history. History must consequently be seen sculpturally. History is sculpture” (Smith 2008, p. 26)

3.2 Aboriginal art and the Environment

Cemented in Australia’s landscape is a vast history that can be found in rock art created by the early Aborigines. Archaeological evidence suggests that groups of Aboriginal people may have colonized Australia some 60,000 years ago and that the oldest rock art may be as much as 50,000 years old. (Chaloupka 1993) Other traditions of body painting, sand and wood sculpture, and bark painting also developed in Aboriginal tribes around the continent, “[giving] meaning to the landscape and [expressing] the creative powers inherent in the universe” (Morphy & Boles

1999, p. 1). Aboriginal artists continue to address such issues today but do so in a different way as they are introduced to new materials, new processes and a changing perception of the land, influenced by the urbanization of Australia by Europeans. (Morphy & Boles 1999) One prominent modern Aboriginal painter, Albert Namatjira, “was a forerunner in the education of white Australians about the deep spiritual connection between people and the land, a sacred wisdom tradition given him by his forebears and represented through his landscape painting” (Williams 2006, p. 126). Aboriginal artists such as Namatjira have had a significant influence on the way Australians relate to their natural environment. (Williams 2006)

3.3 Art’s Relationship with the Environment throughout the 20th Century

Throughout the 20th century, artists around the world have inspired people to take a fresh look at and reevaluate their relationship with nature. (Stephens 2008) During the 1960s, a movement took off in which many artists “started to favor ideas over objects and [devised] works for sites other than gallery and museum spaces” (Smith 2008, p. 14). This movement was spearheaded by what became known as Land art, or Earthworks, in which artists created art in the natural environment by literally sculpting the land. Well-known artists who led this movement include Andy Goldsworthy, Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, James Turrell. (Tufnell 2006) The French artist Christo, who became famous around the world with his works covering massive natural landmarks in different fabrics and plastics, wrapped the rocks surrounding Little Bay, Sydney in white cloth in 1969. The work was a spectacular sight to see but several animals happened to get caught in the cloth, initiating a discussion as to whether works such as this are environmentally friendly or not. The questions raised by the work alluded to the ethics of Land art. (Lailach 2007) Other artists from this period “were informed by more explicitly pragmatic and didactic purposes, focusing for instance on the impact of human development on particular ecosystems” (Smith 2008, p. 14). Well-known examples include Mary Miss, Alice Aycock, Hans Haacke, Newton Harrison, Alan Sonfist and Joseph Beuys. Many of these artists’ works invited participation from the public, such as in *7000 Oaks*, in which Joseph Beuys was joined by local citizens of the town of Kassel, Germany, to successfully reforest the city. Several years later, Agnes Denes’s work in Manhattan, New York, planting and harvesting two acres of wheat on Battery Park Landfill, and Mel Chin’s work experimenting with the use of plants to remediate contaminated soil in a landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota, contributed to the debate about art’s role in modern society and its relationship with the natural environment.

(Smith 2008) In Australia, art became a significant player in the environmental movement during the 1960s when images by photographers Peter Dombrovskis and Olegas Truchanas played key roles in the struggle to preserve natural landmarks in Tasmania. “Truchanas’s photographs created a foundation for many Tasmanians to become educated about the beauty and protection of the wilderness when it was threatened by development” (Williams 2006, p. 184). Along with like-minded conservationists such as Dombrovskis and Ralph Hope-Johnstone, Truchanas held public presentations displaying his photographs in the Hobart Town Hall in hopes of encouraging public action to stop the flooding of Lake Pedder. Dombrovskis’s images of the Franklin River, printed on posters, postcards, calendars, magazines and books, were pivotal in inspiring the environmental campaign in 1983 to stop the damming of the Gordon-below-Franklin. These images “were engrained on the minds of Australians as triumphant wilderness images” (Williams 2006, p. 189). Gordon Glenn brought issues of urbanization and over-consumption of resources to the public eye in his performance of *The Greening*, in which he and more than a dozen assistants rolled ready-made lawn over an entire parking lot in Melbourne. (Glenn 1985)

3.4 Justification and Aims of Study

As humans engage in increasingly unbalanced relationships with the natural environment and each other, there is a growing need for effective mediators through which people of different educational and linguistic backgrounds can communicate necessary plans of action to live more sustainably. Many believe that the universal language of art can adopt this role as both an educator and catalyst for change. This study attempts to answer several important questions about the role and importance of art in society. First, how are artists influenced by environmental and sustainability concerns in their work? Second, how can art effectively communicate environmental and sustainability issues? Finally, should art affect socio-cultural or political change and if so, how might it do this? Also along with this question, how might art serve as innovator of technology and design?

4. Methodology

4.1 Formulation of the Project

The initial proposal for this study was to address art’s role in informing the public about climate change. This idea was significantly inspired by the RMIT Gallery exhibit, “HEAT: Art and Climate Change,” which I was able to see just before it closed at the end of October. Due to

the fact that I would not be able to survey people viewing this exhibit (a central aspect of the investigation) because the study occurred during November, I broadened the focus of the study to examine art's role in addressing environmental and sustainability issues in general. By doing this, I was able to include several other exhibits in the study, as well as other art's projects and festivals.

4.2 How Data Was Collected

At the start of the study, I conducted background research on the internet and in libraries throughout NSW, investigating terms such as 'environmental art,' 'sustainable art' and 'climate change art.' Through these searches, I came across several exhibits, organizations and festivals of interest. In scheduling the primary research period I selected which of these were of greatest significance and feasibility for research and made my travel plans accordingly, setting up interviews with artists at similar times to when I would be visiting exhibits or organizations. Many of the cases included in this study were not found during background research; I became aware of many of them during my travels and interviews and pursued them further from there. This study examines artists and arts initiatives primarily along the East coast of Australia, spanning from Melbourne to Brisbane. Although the study was not limited to this region of Australia, the primary focus was on this region because of art's prevalence there. As a center for the arts and sustainability in Australia, Melbourne is where the bulk of the study took place. During my stay there I visited several relevant exhibits and interview many prominent contemporary artists. Additionally, while in St. Kilda, I discovered an interesting relationship between several artists and community organizations focusing on environmental and sustainability concerns. In Sydney, I interviewed several more artists and examined art initiatives at Marrickville's Reverse Garbage Cooperative. Also, I took part in the first ever Earth Festival at Sydney's Centennial Park. Several other artists throughout New South Wales also provided input to the study, as well as exhibition curators, community organization directors, a festival director and the head of an art's research institute, all of whom provided valuable insights into art's role in addressing environmental and sustainability issues across a large, varied audience. It was necessary to interview these people for several reasons. First, there was very little information on many of them available on the internet or in literature. Second, much of the information that is readily available about these people is not relevant to the intentions of this study. Thus, I decided to talk with these people first-hand in order to get a sense of their

intentions with their creative undertakings and their perception of their own role in affecting change in regards to people’s behaviors and attitudes about environmental and sustainability issues. I recorded some interviews using a tape recorder and most others in my ISP work journal in addition to information about exhibits, organizations and festivals. I analyzed the data gathered by consolidating and comparing interview results, looking for how the interviews addressed the goals of the study. Also included in the study were a group of people surveyed at the MUMA exhibit, “The Ecologies Project,” who provide a sense of art’s impact on viewers in a gallery setting. I analyzed results of these surveys based on the significance of answers given and correlations between answers.

4.3 Creation of Art Piece

In creating the art piece for the project, I contacted several logging and plumbing companies as well as the Myocum Tip Waste Disposal Site by phone in order to enquire about the availability of a stump or a sink I would be able to use for my piece. In the end, a friend who I was staying with during the study allowed me to cut down and use an old, dead Camphorlaural tree he had on his property, providing the stump for the piece. Upon making a trip to the Myocum Tip Waste Disposal Site I was able to find a sink as well. Through wood-working techniques, I cut chunks from the stump to make space for the sink to fit within it.

4.4 Interviews Conducted

Name	Affiliation	Date and Location of Interview
John Dahlsen	Artist	5 November; Byron Bay, NSW
Sam Leach	Artist	10 November; Brunswick, VIC
Dr. Kyla MacFarlane & Geraldine Barlow	Curators: “The Ecologies Project”	12 November; Clayton, VIC
Rob Taylor	President: “Veg Out”, St. Kilda Community Gardens	12 November; St. Kilda, VIC
Paul von Bergen	Director: Earth Festival	13 November; Interview by Phone
Mary Jean	Arts Director: Reverse Garbage	13 November; Interview by Phone
Andrew Hazewinkel & Susan Jacobs	Artists	13 November; Clayton, VIC
Salvatori Lolicato	Artist (Bowling Club Studios)	14 November; St. Kilda, VIC
Elizabeth Milsom	Artist (Bowling Club Studios)	14 November; St. Kilda, VIC

Isabel O'Brien	Artist (Bowling Club Studios)	14 November; St. Kilda, VIC
Nina Sanadze	Artist (Bowling Club Studios)	14 November; St. Kilda, VIC
Lisa Stewart	Artist	14 November; Melbourne, VIC
Mandy Martin	Artist	15 November; Interview by E-Mail
Ken Yonetani	Artist	16 November; Katoomba, NSW
Bonita Ely	Artist, Head of Sculpture Department: UNSW, Core Researcher: ERIA	16 November; Marrickville, NSW
Tony Lloyd	Artist	19 November; Interview by E-Mail
Cameron Robbins	Artist	20 November; Interview by E-Mail
Bruce Alden	Artist, Head of Waste Management: Byron Bay Blues Festival	22 November; Bruswick Heads, NSW
Chris Bond	Artist	24 November; Interview by E-Mail
Allan Giddy	Artist, Professor of Art: UNSW, Director: ERIA	26 November; Interview by Phone

4.5 Getting Contacts

John Dahlsen: e-mail address provided on his website; through e-mail, he gave me his number and other contact information

Sam Leach: contacted through

Dr. Kyla MacFarlane & Geraldine Barlow: contacted MUMA administrator who forwarded message on to curators

Rob Taylor: contacted Veg Out communications through e-mail provided on website → told to see Rob in garden

Paul von Bergen: contacted Earth Festival general enquiries through e-mail provided on website → provided Paul's number

Mary Jean: e-mail address provided on Reverse Garbage website

Andrew Hazewinkel & Susan Jacobs: contacted Conical (an arts organization the artists are involved with) by e-mail → forwarded e-mail on to artists

Salvatori Lolicato: talked with during a trip to the Bowling Club Studios / Veg Out Community Gardens

Elizabeth Milsom: talked with during a trip to the Bowling Club Studios / Veg Out Community Gardens

Isabel O'Brien: talked with during a trip to the Bowling Club Studios / Veg Out Community Gardens

Nina Sanadze: e-mail address provided in “The Garden Party” exhibit catalogue

Lisa Stewart: sent e-mail to Kyla MacFarlane (curator of “The Ecologies Project”) → forwarded on to artist

Mandy Martin: contacted Christine Abrahams Gallery → forwarded e-mail on to artist

Ken Yonetani: e-mail address provided on artist’s website

Bonita Ely: e-mail address provided on ERIA website

Tony Lloyd: contacted Hill Smith Gallery (representing) by e-mail who forwarded message on to artist

Cameron Robbins: e-mail provided on his website

Bruce Alden: referred through a friend; talked with while in Brunswick Heads

Chris Bond: sent e-mail to Kyla MacFarlane (curator of “The Ecologies Project”) → forwarded on to artist

Allan Giddy: e-mail address provided on ERIA website

4.6 Limitations and Shortcomings of the Data

Because of the prevalence of art throughout Australia, there were few limitations to the extent of the data available to this study. I was able to find new sources and data by simply walking around many of the cities I visited. One limitation that I found during the study was the fact that many artists do not advertise on the internet; there must be many other relevant artists and organizations around Australia that I simply did not come across in my background research. Possibly the greatest shortcoming of this study is that I was not able to effectively determine if and how art affected change in individual and community behavior and attitudes toward environmental and sustainability issues. Also, in regards to the installation of my art piece for the study, lack of approval by the Byron Shire Council to set it up in Byron Bay limited my original intention and the potential effectiveness of the piece to inform a large audience about certain environmental and sustainability issues.

5. Results

5.1 Contemporary Art in the Gallery

This section highlights exhibits that focus on environmental and sustainability issues as a central theme. Interviews with artists featured in the exhibits are included as well.

HEAT: Art & Climate Change

The first exhibit I visited for this study was the RMIT Gallery exhibit, “HEAT: Art and Climate Change.” This exhibit involved work by 24 artists and explores how art is responding to global climate change. This was “the first Australian exhibition to incorporate a range of climate related concerns within the context of sustainability” (Davies 2008, 3). The show was comprised of works by mostly Australian artists but also several artists from Europe and New Zealand. Australian artist Ash Keating’s work with the *2020? Project* brought a group of people together to sort out a pile of rubbish and make artwork from it. Bonita Ely, a well-known “environmental artist” working since the 1960s, was included in this show with her performance, *Murray River Punch* (1980) and photographs from her *Murray River’s Edge* series (2008). Ely’s work emphasizes how humans are contributing to the degradation of the Murray River through poor resource management. When asked how her work came to be shown in the “HEAT” exhibit, Ely replied that “*the director of the gallery was actually in the audience when I did the Murray River Punch performance back in 1980 and she remembered the smell very well. I think that’s probably why I was on the list: my wonderful ability to make disgusting smells*” (11/16/08). Ken Yonetani, whose porcelain work *The Dead Sea* (2008) depicted coral from the Great Barrier Reef, attempts to address how global warming is damaging the biodiversity and wellbeing of the reef. (Ken Yonetani 11/16/08)



Ken Yonetani -
Dead Sea (2008)

Sam Leach's painting, *Granrojo* (2008), depicts a jellyfish which is overpopulating the oceans of the world. Tony Lloyd's painting, *We Have All The Time In The World* (2008), presents an airplane flying over ice-capped mountains, spewing out exhaust. Cameron Robbins creates a physical environment for his piece *CO2 Vortex Chamber* (2008) which the viewer actually walks into and engages with. Jill Orr's performance works, *Southern Cross – to bear and behold* (2008) and *Bleeding Trees* (1979), document Orr's dramatic presence in Australian places and present the viewer with many powerful images: pictures of Orr parading around the salt flats of Lake Mitre, carrying a burning umbrella, dangling from a tree, tied to its limbs by her own, hanging from the root system of an unearthed stump and one of her head underground, Orr gasping for breath.



Jill Orr –
Bleeding Trees (1979)

Janet Laurence's work *Carbon Capture 3* (2007) utilizes alchemical processes to mimic natural phenomenon. English artists David Buckland and Max Eastley's film *ARCTIC* (2008) presents images of floating icebergs in the Arctic overlaid with images of a pregnant woman and a crawling infant. The "HEAT" exhibit was presented by several media outlets which brought ideas from the show to popular society. The November 12th ABC Sunday Arts Show included interviews with artists whose work was shown in the exhibit, asking them questions about art's role in addressing global environmental issues such as climate change. Also, a September 6th article by Andrew Stephens, "Changing the Artistic Climate," brings the discussion of the show's importance in addressing such issues to the public in the popular Australian newspaper, *The Age*.

In order to get a sense of artists' intentions for their works in this exhibit as well as their opinions about art's role in society, I conducted interviews with some of the artists featured in the show. These conversations are provided below with the questions in bold:

Do you think art can affect socio-cultural or political change and if so, how?

Sam Leach: *It probably can but I think it works best if it's a subtle impact. I don't necessarily think that overtly political art is particularly effective because on a whole, people assume that the artist adopts a certain political vision anyway. Most political art then just reinforces a particular political viewpoint of the artist rather than having any kind of influence. If it does have any influence, it tends to just make people think about the world or their actions or the place they find themselves in a slightly different way. (11/10/08)*

Ken Yonetani: *I hope art can change the way people see the world but not only art can do that. (11/16/08)*

Bonita Ely: *Art can inform people about what's going on. It can provide solutions to some problems, I think. There's an artist called Andrew Sunly Smith who made a little garden in the back of his car and drove around and made mulch and compost, etc. In some ways, this does stay in the confines of the arts community in terms of communication but there is this kind of ricochet effect. There are other artists who are going to small villages in Africa and helping people get together and improve their farming practices and other artists using and demonstrating sustainable energy supplies. Also, there are artists who are helping to reclaim environmentally trashed places. Artists, to some extent, are becoming more and more practical and more activist in the way they are working. On the other hand, there are artists like me who are more focused on communicating these issues to the public. (11/16/08)*

Tony Lloyd: *No, I don't think that the visual arts can affect any sort of real change in the way humans act as a culture. I believe it can change the way an individual looks at the world and it may challenge the way an individual thinks about what art can represent but I don't believe that the visual arts have the same power that literature and film have of making individuals think about their place in the political, cultural and physical world. Perhaps visual art did have this power briefly in the 19th century. I'm thinking of Delacroix's paintings of the Massacre at Chios and "Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi" and the impact these paintings had on the public's awareness of the plight of Greece under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. I think that these paintings had a strong effect because of a coincidence of mass public interest in art and the*

fact that painting was the most affecting image-making technology of the day. Today we have mass public interest in art, but as a source of imagery it is competing with the far more authoritative forms of film, photojournalism, amateur photography and even animation. As a channel for affecting socio-cultural or political change, it is somewhat redundant. (11/19/08)

Cameron Robbins: *Yes. Maybe it can help only in a limited way but at least art involves direct action and it casts a wide psychological net to cover associated issues besides the main topic. (11/20/08)*

Does your work attempt to affect change?

Sam Leach: *It's not specifically what I have set out to do. My painting in the HEAT exhibition depicts a jellyfish which was a newly discovered species. I find it very interesting that our extensive coverage of the earth's surface now enables us to find out more about the planet than we used to. This could be quite valuable but the downside of that is an offshoot of systematic exploitation of the last hundred years. I don't really think that technology is bad or that progress is bad but I think that it is has consequences. To the extent that my art tries to encourage change in people, I am just trying to emphasize that there is still room for some kind of techno-optimism and that our view of technology should not necessarily be bleak. (11/10/08)*

Ken Yonetani: *Yes. (11/16/08)*

Tony Lloyd: *No. My only ambition is to make good art. Gertrude Stein said that she wrote for herself and strangers and I have that same attitude. I don't want to make art for a specific audience (for example, one that does or doesn't believe in climate change). In my paintings I have explored subjects of natural, socio-political, historical, mythological and cultural natures. I want people to think that they are good paintings and I want them to think about the ideas depicted. (11/19/08)*

Cameron Robbins: *Not necessarily but if the work addresses a topic at its inception then the outcome is likely to be inclusive of that and also wider readings. It is then up to the viewer to make their own associations and ask their own questions. (11/20/08)*

How is your art informed by your concerns at the time when you are making it?

Sam Leach: *Very much so. When I am making my art, I listen to a lot of science podcasts and radio shows and I am also an avid reader of most of the kind of Popular Science magazines so a lot of the material I put into my paintings comes from those types of publications. Of course, the state of the planet is a very frequently recurring theme in those kinds of places so the painting [of*

the Granrojo jellyfish] was very much about those kinds of issues coming up in popular culture. (11/10/08)

Ken Yonetani: I grew up in Concrete Jungle, Tokyo, and this was where a lot of my anxiety about the environment came about. When I was growing up, the city was becoming more and more developed. As a kid, I remember seeing lots of butterflies and dragonflies. Now, when I go back to my parents' house, I see none. The streets where I lived used to be dirt but got covered up by asphalt over the years. I saw the nature I loved get dominated by the city. Also, I have been diving to see the Great Barrier Reef for a long time up in Fiji and Okinawa and over the years, I have seen how the coral is becoming bleached. This has caused me a great deal of anxiety and I get over this anxiety through my artwork. When I made the Fumi Tiles piece, it was a very monotonous routine, a little bit like a monk's practice. It became a meditative process. Making art is healing for me. (11/16/08)

Bonita Ely: Well, almost completely. Not all of my art is. I also make art about social issues or cultural issues and sometimes personal stuff. Not usually though. My work is usually more about how I see things in relation to the environment: how we are impacting the environment or how we, as a kind of mammalian cane toads, are making great advances in destroying our environment. Also, I'm fascinated by the way humanity is drawn to communicate with other species – like me and my dog. I think its bizarre how we have this incredible desire to get to know nature and communicate with other species. At the same time, we have a great deal of difficulty recognizing ourselves as a part of nature. (11/16/08)

Tony Lloyd: I do not consider myself to be an environmental artist and my art never has a political message. I do think that my concerns surface in the work but they do so metaphorically. I believe that all art is influenced by the time it is made in: the UFO films of the 1950s were a metaphor for Cold War xenophobia. 13th century church frescoes of black devils in hell were fuelled by fear of Moorish invasions. Even in George A. Romero's zombie film, "Dawn of the Dead" you can find themes of mindless consumerism, 1970s women's liberation and race relations. This way of exploring concerns by metaphorically displacing them is the process I employ. (11/19/08)

Cameron Robbins: It is all about my concerns, whatever they may be. (11/20/08)

The Ecologies Project

Another exhibit addressing related themes, entitled “The Ecologies Project,” opened within a week of the “HEAT” exhibit at the Monash University Museum of Art. This exhibit was quite large, displaying works from MUMA’s permanent collection as well as many new works, drawing from a total of 40 artists. Similar to the “HEAT” exhibit, the curators of “The Ecologies Project” worked in conjunction with researchers from the Sustainability Institute at Monash University to create a show that was “indicative of the critical reflection on sustainability issues taking place at Monash, and by artists more widely” (Barlow & MacFarlane 2008) Most of the works included in the show were by Australian artists although there were some by artists from New Zealand as well. Andrew Hazewinkel’s film works *Turbulence* (2007) and *Splinter Cycle [recurrent dream]* (2008) depicted plastic bottles and soccer balls as well as pieces of wood crashing around in the Tiber River in Rome. Susan Jacobs’s work *Static Elasticity* (2008) was comprised of many differently sized charcoal pieces stuck together to create an intriguing, flowing sculptural work. Collaboratively, Andrew Hazewinkel and Susan Jacobs created *Sketch of intent [12 attempts]* (2008), which was part of a larger work entitled *Exhaustive Nature*. In this work the artists attempted to create fire using only an ice lens and dried grass. Ash Keating takes part in this exhibit as well, displaying his work *Press Release* (2005), in which the artist cuts an image of a bird from hundreds of copies of the same newspaper and throws the cut-outs into the air freely in an empty warehouse. The left over newspapers from which Keating has cut these images are present in the exhibit.



Ash Keating –
Press Release (2005)

Nick Mangan's work *Colony* (2005) is a sculptural piece made from various found objects and wood: an axe, shovel and hammer handles, stained dowel, western red cedar, found teak forks and spoons, elk hair, nylon hair and jute. Stuart Ringholt displays a film of his, *Pan-handler's plough* (2007), set in an open forest, in which he wheels a small tree into the forest, drops it in a hole and leaves. The tree then suddenly disappears. Lisa Stewart's *Brainstone to Birdman* (2007) is an animation film in which the artist tells a story using images of prehistoric dinosaurs and their skeletons, volcanoes and jewels. Mandy Martin's *Epic fatality; Yallourn Powerstation, Victoria* (2007) and *Epic fatality: iceberg* (2007) display painted images of a nuclear power station and an iceberg respectively, set over heavily layered, murky backgrounds.



Mandy Martin –
Epic Fatality: iceberg
(2007)

Raquel Ormella illustrates several scenes from a Wilderness Society office on whiteboards in *Wild Rivers: Cairns, Brisbane, Sydney* (2008). In this piece, the artist presents some of the organization's initiatives and projects to prevent the degradation of Australia's largest river, the Murray through intricately overlaid drawings of the river, the office, and various texts. Ormella "[creates] a multidimensional schema, representing the complex relationships between city and wilderness, politics and the media, the aspirations and realities of contemporary political activism" (Barlow & MacFarlane 2008) Brodie Ellis's film project *Super pit* (2008) documents a mining operation, emphasizing the monstrous size of machines being used by miners today. Finally, the curators of the exhibit included one of Peter Dombrovskis's photographs, *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bed, Franklin River* (1979), a means of connecting the exhibit to a historical

context – this image was made famous by the successful 1983 campaign to stop the damming of the Gordon-below-Franklin.

As a means of determining the effectiveness of “The Ecologies Project” in affecting viewers’ attitudes towards the environment and their behavior in regards to environmental and sustainability issues, I conducted a survey at the MUMA Gallery. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the semester at Monash had finished a short time before the ISP study period, very few people were visiting the exhibit while I was there. Thus this survey was not very expansive in terms of how many people took part in it (only seven) or its significance to the study as a whole. There were several interesting comments made on the survey though, in regards to one of the questions posed. I have included several of the responses given below with the question in bold: **Did this exhibit inspire you to think about your consumption of resources including energy, water, wood products, etc.? Please explain how certain pieces inspired you and how you might change your ways as a result.**

- “I was surprised at the level of refuse found in waterways as in Andrew Hazewinkel’s DVD of the river with bottles. I might be more likely to remove any rubbish found in the rivers or elsewhere.”

- “It’s compelling but I don’t know that the pieces were direct enough in their impact. I think that probably makes them better, though.”

- “Not really – I come from a scientific background so the link was very abstract for me.”

- “The floating plastic bottles video was inspiring. I’ll make sure I don’t kick any soccer balls into rivers!”

- “Made me think about my plastic consumption and how that material never goes away. I want to minimize my use of plastic.”

To get a sense of the artist’s intentions for their works in “The Ecologies Project” and the curators’ intentions for the show, as well as their opinions about art’s role in society, I conducted several interviews. These conversations are provided below with the questions in bold:

What inspired the creation of this exhibit?

Geraldine Barlow: We both have had an interest in environmental issues in different ways for quite some time and it seemed to be something that the students and many young people as well as the researchers at the University [Monash] are passionate about so we thought it was a good framework for an exhibition in that regard. There was just a question of what our perspective on

the topic would be. I think the feeling that it had moved from being a peripheral concern to becoming very much acknowledged as a central, shared issue made it a good point in time to look at how artists were dealing with the subject, maybe talking about whether it had changed or where there were strategies and ways of dealing with it. (11/12/08)

Would there have been as much pertinent work or would the exhibit have been as significant several years or even months ago?

Kyla MacFarlane: *A few years ago it would still have been as pertinent in the sense that we should be addressing these things but recently there has been a groundswell of thought and interest and almost panic about what we need to do that makes it particularly significant. (11/12/08)*

Geraldine Barlow: *And I think that some of the visual motifs in the show are read a bit differently now than they might have been, say five years ago. For example, the images of Antarctica and the idea of the Arctic and Antarctic ice as being one of the first locations to be affected by climate change has a huge impact on us. Also, there is Susan's work with charcoal and how it relates to the clean coal debate. Had it been ten or fifteen years ago, I think wilderness images would have been a lot more prevalent. (11/12/08)*

Do you think art can affect socio-cultural or political change and if so, how?

Kyla MacFarlane: *The thing is that art isn't developing any new technologies but it tends to things that need to be tended to in a way that is not necessarily didactic or straight-forward. In doing that, though, I think it does do some kind of work. The Peter Dombrovskis image is an interesting example of this. (11/12/08)*

Geraldine Barlow: *In a way, the Dombrovskis work seems to link to such idealism and many artists would really hope and dream to have an impact like that. What that work did was not just due to the inherent qualities of the work but how it was used in a political campaign. We thought that including that work in the show was symbolic of the desire of art and artists to play an active role in these debates. (11/12/08)*

Andrew Hazewinkel: *Absolutely. You have to distinguish between contemporary art and the media, though. (11/13/08)*

Susan Jacobs: *Yes, I think art can affect people's consciousness. (11/13/08)*

Lisa Stewart: *Art can offer a different way of looking at things and it is a good record of sentiment. I think art can act as a kind of archive for these feelings. (11/14/08)*

Mandy Martin: *Art can work on subliminal levels to communicate emotionally with an audience. It is not always receptive to soft propaganda or intellectual ideas but this depends, of course, on how receptive the audience is and at what site the audience is accessing the art (i.e. a public space or a national art institution).* (11/15/08)

Chris Bond: *I think that it can affect this kind of change, and historically it has. Unfortunately, to be effective it needs to affect on a mass scale and so has to be fairly confronting and direct – this lowers its ability to be sophisticated (and interesting as a work of art outside the context of the issue it's addressing).* (11/24/08)

Does your work attempt to affect change?

Susan Jacobs: *I hope my work might infiltrate people's minds on a slow level of thinking.* (11/13/08)

Lisa Stewart: *It is not my intention when I set out to make a piece but I hope that it might influence people to change.* (11/14/08)

Mandy Martin: *Yes. I attempt to communicate with the ready made audience in part, that attends commercial and public galleries, as well as through the main stream media. The art audience is exceeds the sport audience in Australia.* (11/15/08)

Chris Bond: *No.* (11/24/08)

How is your art informed by your concerns at the time when you are making it?

Andrew Hazewinkel: *Normally, my work is not about environmental issues but I am finding that anything relating to environmental issues is ultimately social in nature. I attempt to address such issues in my work.* (11/13/08)

Susan Jacobs: *The thinking behind my work influences the making of it just as much as the making influences the thinking. The process of my work may reflect an interest in sustainability but the making of the piece develops my ideas further.* (11/13/08)

Lisa Stewart: *Art is a way for me to articulate ideas that I can't put into words. It's a way to express ideas in a different way from talking when I am bad at articulating my ideas verbally.* (11/14/08)

Mandy Martin: *All artwork is in one sense autobiographical so my worries and environmental concerns are reflected in my work. I have been interested in climate change and global warming for a few decades now. I had nightmares when I was a kid about tidal waves and population*

control, all stuff happening then. I now live next to the biggest gold/copper mine in Australia and an hour away from coal fields and power stations. (11/15/08)

Chris Bond: *I've only recently become aware of how much personal concerns have crept into my practice. For a long time I thought my work existed outside my worries. Following the death of my partner in 2006 after a 2 year battle against cancer, I stopped making art, and had a chance to look at what I had been making at the time she was sick. I was surprised to see how autobiographical my work had become. The book paintings included in *The Ecologies Project* are from this period, usually with myself as the "author", with a range of titles that refer to the combination of pessimism and anxiety that I was experiencing at that time. (11/24/08)*

The Garden Party

Another exhibit included in this study entitled "The Garden Party" took place at the St. Kilda Town Hall Gallery and was comprised of work by 19 artists of the St. Kilda Bowling Club Studios. These studio spaces border what has become the Veg Out Community Gardens: a community organization made up of almost 800 local members and involved with at least 45 different interest groups (Rob Taylor 11/12/08). The exhibit emphasizes how "the Gardens' central position has inadvertently become an extension of the studio spaces, providing inspiration and an affinity with the artists in its advocacy of engaging local residents through community, sustainability and environmental concerns" (Longato 2008). The artists included in the exhibit address such concerns in many different ways. Elizabeth Milsom transprints the shapes of vegetables and other plants onto canvas, sometimes using the natural colors of certain plants as dyes. Milsom comments, "Plants are my medium and I have immersed myself in their secret life" (Longato 2008). Salvatori Lolicato, one of the first artists to occupy the Bowling Club Studios and the first person to set up a garden plot on what was once the bowling green, utilizes chemical reactions to etch images into materials such as bronze and wood. Isabel O'Brien's photographs highlight movement in nature and the passage of time, inspired by the garden as a site of contemplation. (Isabel O'Brien 11/14/08) Miles Bennett's sculpture, *Out Nature 2* (2008), uses found objects and light emitting technologies to explore the natural desires of humans in relation to technological advances and how "man made objects ultimately distance us further from truly experiencing lasting happiness, belonging and love." Bennett says that "these things can be found by working with the soil, growing food and sharing it with others" (Longato 2008).

Kylie Baudino's sculptural pieces, *Welcome* (2008) and *Destination* (2008), utilize a garden gate and a bench as the base for a magical weaving through the air of stacked garden pots. A highlight of the exhibit was Nina Sanadze's *Veg Out Tower* – a sculptural work that was funded by The City of Port Phillip through its Cultural Development Fund. This piece is made up of 96 portraits of members of the community gardens, as well as each person's response to the question, "At the moment, what is the main mission or achievement of your life?" These portraits were then embedded in colored resin tiles and stacked as a tower.



Nina Sanadze –
Veg Out Tower (2008)

In the catalogue for this show, the curator, Grace Longato points out that "these artists have made a significant contribution to the cultural life of the City of Port Phillip community" (Longato 2008). This exhibit highlighted a very important aspect of art's role in addressing environmental and sustainability issues: the role of the artist in the development of sustainable, environmentally conscious communities.

I interviewed several of the artists whose works were included in this exhibit, as well as the president of Veg Out, Rob Taylor, while touring the community gardens. I wanted to investigate the relationship between the gardens and the studios more deeply so I asked these people about their histories and perceptions of the benefits this relationship provides. Also, I

inquired into the artist's insights about role of art in addressing environmental and sustainability issues and affecting change on different levels. These conversations are presented below with the questions in bold:

How has the relationship between the studios and the community garden developed in your time here?

Rob Taylor: *The relationship between the artists and the garden used to be dysfunctional. It has only recently taken off and led to much collaboration. (11/12/08)*

Nina Sanadze: *At first it was a little bit like us and them. There was a kind of separation between us. Sal [one of the artists working in the studios], was the first to start a garden on this property and pretty much got the whole thing going. Well, there are now actually 84 artists who have plots in the community garden but don't even work in the Bowling Club Studios. We started having artist breakfasts which then turned into community breakfasts. I began to do work days at the gardens and eventually started my own plot. (11/14/08)*

How do the Bowling Club Studio artists and the gardeners at Veg Out benefit from their proximity to each other?

Rob Taylor: *The artists definitely benefit from the gardens through creative inspiration. Some of the artists have plots on the garden now so Veg Out benefits from their presence. "The Garden Party" exhibit might make Veg Out more permanent. The gardens are able to remain on this land because of government land recreation laws: the more the gardens are used and respected by the community of St. Kilda, the more permanent they become. (11/12/08)*

Salvatori Lolicato: *The garden and the studios complement each other, enforcing a sense of community. Also, the proximity makes it easy to bounce ideas off of each other. The sculpture competition that has been taking place at the gardens has also brought the some of the Bowling Club Studio artists' works into the garden plots. This encourages a fun, decorative setting. (11/14/08)*

Elizabeth Milsom: *I have my own plot at Veg Out so I benefit from the food it provides me as well as a special connection to the seasons. I take a lot of inspiration from the gardens and use many of the plants from my own plot and friends' plots for my artwork, in which I transprint vegetables onto canvas. Sometimes I come to Veg Out to tend my garden plot, sometimes I come to be inspired. (11/14/08)*

Isabel O'Brien: *Many of the artists have plots on the garden. There are many like-minded people here to share ideas with. Also, by being so close, the artists are encouraged to work with the community and are inevitably inspired by the gardens. Ultimately, the artists at the Bowling Club Studios just want a place to work and these studios are cheaper than others because they are supported by city council.* (11/14/08)

Nina Sanadze: *The garden definitely inspires the artists but being so close, we influence each other: the garden is very artsy, and the art being made in the studios is very "gardeny".* (11/14/08)

How can you see the relationship between the artists and the gardeners developing in years to come?

Rob Taylor: *Increased interaction between each other and more community art projects.* (11/12/08)

Salvatori Lolicato: *The town of St. Kilda wants to support this relationship between the gardens and the studios: it makes rent cheaper for the artists and establishes the gardens more permanently in the community. This relationship should continue to get more beneficial for both the artists and the gardeners.* (11/14/08)

Elizabeth Milsom: *The sharing of ideas should be given importance. Ideas come from relaxed, face-to-face conversations such as this one.* (11/14/08)

Isabel O'Brien: *Land is precious in St. Kilda and the more successful the gardens are, the more permanent they become. This relationship between the studios and the gardens may secure this land for the community. Also, I hope people will start becoming more conscious about the need for community and sustainability.* (11/14/08)

Do you think art can affect socio-cultural or political change and if so, how?

Elizabeth Milsom: *Yes. Art can help people appreciate nature more.* (11/14/08)

Isabel O'Brien: *Yes, I think it can but it is important not to yell or point fingers with art. We have to present issues not in a negative or dire way but positively.* (11/14/08)

Nina Sanadze: *It definitely can but in a passive-aggressive way.* (11/14/08)

Does your work attempt to affect change?

Nina Sanadze: *Yes, in a gentle way. I am not an activist, I am a portrait artist and a community artist. I help by engaging with the community creatively. I am not doing anything directly for the*

environment, like planting trees, but hope that my work may help people think more about these issues. (11/14/08)

How is your art informed by your concerns at the time when you are making it?

Elizabeth Milsom: *Sometimes I am just worried about how things might not keep growing. My work expresses this issue somewhat. I hope that people viewing my art might look more closely at the beauty of nature as a result. (11/14/08)*

Nina Sanadze: *I act as a mirror for the community, gathering information, presenting it in a new light, and reflecting it back to the people. In a way, I express the concerns of other people through my work. I do a lot of work with community groups, collaborating creatively with people of the community. (11/14/08)*

5.2 Art's Relationship with Community Concerns about Environmental and Sustainability Issues

This section presents several organizations and projects utilizing art to address the environmental and sustainability concerns of many communities in Australia.

Port Phillip EcoCentre Artist-in-Residence Program

The Port Phillip EcoCentre has established an initiative to employ artists in community development through its Artist-in-Residence program. The EcoCentre, which is located in the St. Kilda Botanical Gardens, is a non-profit, community-run, environment group that provides a base for many groups involved in promoting biodiversity, sustainability and community action. It is a place “where environmental solutions are hatched and nurtured and where everyone can come together to create, experience and enjoy art” (Port Phillip EcoCentre 2008). Involving local community groups, schools and residents, the center is a venue for these groups to join artists in learning about art and the environment. Artists-in-Residence are provided free facilities to work in as well as project materials and links with the local community and other organizations. One of the qualities that this program seeks is for the artist to have worked in a community context before and have a strong interest to work with groups of people on an environmental and artistic level. The EcoCentre hopes to offer 4 residencies for “environmentally focused” artists in 2009. (Port Phillip EcoCentre 2008)

The Merrigong Project: An Environmental Art Project for the Illawarra Escarpment

Just as the Artist-in-Residence program at Port Phillip EcoCentre attempted to bring local residents together with the mutual goal of environmental learning, an environmental art project for the Illawarra Escarpment entitled the Merrigong Project was initiated to bring members of several Aboriginal communities together in hopes of inspiring a renewed appreciation for their land and their cultural heritage, both of which are closely linked. The project began with four site-specific community consultations between artists and local residents. Some residents were specifically invited because of their particular knowledge in certain areas such as heritage, history (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal), environmental concerns, environmental art practice, sculpture, architecture and cultural development. These community consultations formed the basis for the artist's briefs. Concepts for the artworks, which the artists developed in regards to community input from each region of the escarpment, were that the artworks would "create an enhanced experience of each designated place itself, rather than an object to be looked at...[and] be thematically linked, with each one focusing on an aspect of the escarpment's natural identity" (Bessell 2000). Some of the key words for the physical and conceptual resonances of the artworks were place, Aboriginality, environment, history and escarpment. These pieces were designed to be "[translators] of place – not in a literal or didactic way, but in creating a sense of appreciation and wonder about the place and its layered meanings." Also, "to reflect and resonate with a strong connection with nature and the natural surroundings" (Bessell 2000).

"River Dreams – Writing and Art by Children of the Murray-Darling River Basin"

Similar to the Merrigong Project in its encouragement of direct community interaction to address environmental concerns in a specific region, the *Special Forever* project brought together thousands of primary school students and teachers to create art and poetry inspired by their environment. Samples of these pieces were compiled into the book River Dreams. This project grew out of a unique partnership between Australia's Primary English Teaching Association and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, "involving more than 20,000 primary school children in valuable land care and natural resources issues throughout the Basin" (Murray-Darling Basin Commission & Primary English Teaching Association 2006, p. 7). The children who were able to take part in this project were given the opportunity to express what

they felt about the environment in paintings, drawings and poetry. “Their work is a comprehensive visual and literary outpouring of their feelings for the beauty of the landscape, waterways, flora and fauna gained from first hand observation (MDBC & PETA 2006, p. 7) Through this project, thousands of children were given a renewed ‘sense of belonging’ to their land and important discussions regarding the present and future well-being of the Basin were started amongst schools and families. (MDBC & PETA 2006)

Murray River Story

Addressing similar issues to the MDBC and PETA’s *Special Forever* project, *Murray River Story* utilized the medium of the performing arts rather than visual arts to address the threats to the ecology of the Murray River on a community-wide level. Brown and Mills define community theater as “participatory theatre of local relevance that will develop local culture and help achieve local aspirations by building empowerment and trust” (2004, p. 43). Researchers began this project by interviewing nearly 100 people living and working along the Murray. These peoples’ stories and impressions of the river provided the inspiration for the writers of the play, who addressed issues such as the conflicting interests of development and tourism and the effects of over-consumption of resources on river ecology and agriculture. Many local organizations contributed to the project along with “scientists, anglers, farmers, conservation group members, tourism operators, journalists, bird observers, industrialists, students, drug rehabilitation inmates, bureaucrats and local politicians” (Brown & Mills 2004, p. 43). By bringing such a diverse range of community members together, *Murray River Story* encouraged the community to “negotiate (though it’s called ‘rehearse’) a common understanding (though it’s called a ‘performance’) in a situation where they have considerable power to shape ideas, to compose the words that are spoken and ultimately to directly address their fellow citizens from the stage, effectively inviting them to consider and follow particular plans of action” (Brown & Mills 2004, p. 44). The play was ultimately performed to an audience of hundreds of community members on the banks of the river. *Murray River Story* was a conduit for community debate about a range of environmental and sustainability concerns. (Brown & Mills 2004)

City of Melbourne – Council House 2 Project

Changing focus from the country to the city, Melbourne’s Council House 2 project brought artists and architects together in the design and construction of a new council office building, designed to conserve energy and water as well as improve the well-being of the occupants. This unique building project was innovative in its design process and thus provided a model for future projects to follow. Artists played a significant role in the project, “[reflecting], [complementing], and/or [questioning] the design team’s commitment to sustainable design” (City of Melbourne 2008). Artist Cameron Robbins’s *Double Vortex* piece forms a section of the wall between the CH2 foyer and café on the ground floor reception. This piece is made of two hand-blown glass chambers, within which two vortices spin in opposite directions, constructed atop a stainless steel framework. “The twin chambers draw an analogy to the human respiratory system, positively reinforcing the idea of CH2 as a living system. [This piece] also refers to ‘the experiment’ - a process of exploration and invention, both in the artwork and in CH2” (City of Melbourne 2008). In this way, the artist has played a role in highlighting sustainable features of the Council House 2 building, emphasizing their importance as common values of the institution. David Wong’s work on the roof design of CH2 brings together art and horticulture through the use of indigenous and non-indigenous foliage and grasses growing throughout structures and climbers of steel, aged timber, rock and wire. The East Core wall of the rooftop is designed to “reflect the bush [through] a stylised representation using bluestone rock caps and rusted steel columns” (City of Melbourne 2008). Through these features, the artist has encouraged a connection between the building and Australia’s natural environment. Artist Janet Laurence’s *Waterveil* makes up the wall behind the concierge desk on the ground floor of the building and “reveals hydrology processes, [such as] the blackwater recycling treatment utilized in CH2..., educating in a playful and poetic way, whilst connecting to the total concept of the building” (City of Melbourne 2008). These examples highlight the importance of artists in raising awareness about sustainable building techniques and technologies in a way that not only other building projects can learn from but also the general public. (City of Melbourne 2008)

Reverse Garbage Cooperative and M.A.D. (Make a Difference)

The non-profit Reverse Garbage cooperative in Marrickville, NSW, contributes to raising people’s awareness about sustainability issues in a more subliminal way. This organization,

which started in 1977, collects and sorts items from the local community that would have otherwise become rubbish and redistributes such items back to people throughout the area. (Reverse Garbage 2008) M.A.D., or Make a Difference, is an initiative of Reverse Garbage that started in 2006 encouraging the re-use of materials in art and design projects. M.A.D. is located in Sydney, although it is soon to move to a warehouse at the Reverse Garbage site, and sells artworks, furniture, lighting fixtures, and other design products made specifically from at least 50% recycled materials by local community members. In 2000, Reverse Garbage held its first “Junk Love” competition, in which artists were challenged to make works using only recycled materials. The competition was so successful that in 2005, 200 winning pieces were situated in a permanent gallery exhibition sponsored by Toyota. (Mary Jean 11/13/08) When asked if the arts can affect socio-cultural or political change and if this is an intention of Reverse Garbage, the arts director of the organization, Mary Jean replied, *“Yes, art can affect change by drawing an audience. If the art is made sustainably and the people buying it know this, they will become more conscious of their use of resources. Ultimately, some people want art that is beautiful and some people want to support sustainability. Reverse Garbage allows people both opportunities in one place”* (11/13/08). By providing a center for sustainably made art to flourish and for consumers to purchase such works, Reverse Garbage develops community consciousness and awareness about waste and consumption habits. (Reverse Garbage 2008)

ERIA (Environmental Research Institute for Art)

In a similar way to Reverse Garbage, the Environmental Research Institute for Art acts as a hub for the advancement of sustainable practices. The institute was established as a result of the success of the SolArch exhibitions: Lumin, which took place in 1999 and Appliance, in 2002. These exhibits featured artists using renewable energy and lighting systems in their works. (Allan Giddy 11/26/08) Now in its fifth year, the ERIA conducts “high level research into the sustainability of electronic public art from fabrication to installation, exploring embedded, regenerative, aesthetic systems for the development of site-specific art” (Giddy 2008). This focus on the importance of sustainable elements in public art is testament to the institute’s role in raising public awareness about renewable energy technologies. In 2006, two members of the institute, Michael Lewarne and Bonita Ely, installed works in Sydney and Vietnam, respectively. Lewarne’s piece, *Sculpture by the Sea* involved the use of a solar-powered lighting system to

illuminate a section of rocks on the Sydney coastline. Ely's *Lake Thunder* is a 6 meter high sculptural depiction of a lightning bolt made from tube steel and a photovoltaic surface, making the piece glow in the darkness of night. These pieces are good representations of one of the aims of the ERIA: to "develop sculptural practices that extend the physical site both practically and ideologically" (Giddy 2008). When asked how public art can inspire a heightened appreciation for the natural environment, the director of the ERIA, Allan Giddy replied, "*Good public art responds and fits into its natural environment, enriching the features of the site. There should be a resonance between the work and the environment it is situated in and it should improve the quality of the site. Some old factory sites have tremendous beauty in them which just needs to be brought out and accentuated*" (11/26/08). Thus, through its research and installation of public art projects promoting sustainable technologies, the Environmental Research Institute for Art plays an important role in enhancing community appreciation of natural sites and public awareness of renewable energy advances. (Allan Giddy 11/26/08) Giddy's work is exemplary of this aspect of the institute. Speaking about his work Giddy comments, "*With the ice heart piece in which we constructed a refrigerated housing to keep a heart-shaped ice block frozen on a beach on a sunny day, the solar panels were out in plain view so hundreds of people could see it and be amazed at the fact. I definitely think that that piece must have had an effect on at least some of those people in making them more aware about these technologies. Many of the technologies we need to make the world a better place are hidden behind walls or on roofs so people cannot easily see them. Artists can present the visual tip of the iceberg with these technologies*" (Allan Giddy 11/26/08).

Greenpeace's Energy [R]evolution Tour and Cairns Art Project

With similar aims of raising the general public's awareness about the growing appeal of renewable energy, Greenpeace's Energy [R]evolution Tour emphasizes community action to affect political change in regards to the Australian government's energy policies. This tour ran along the eastern coast of Australia from Sydney to Cairns, staging demonstrations and holding meetings with environmental groups and communities to actively show their support for a swift transition to renewable energy sources. At the conclusion of this tour, local residents from the community of Cairns gathered to create a 3,000 candle art piece depicting a wind turbine. The piece was a display of the community's strong yearning for an "Energy [R]evolution," in which

Australia will begin to utilize renewable energy resources rather than coal. (Greenpeace Australia Pacific 2008)

5.3 Art in Environment and Sustainability Themed Festivals

This section demonstrates how several festivals in Australia use the arts to promote consciousness about environmental and sustainability issues.

Earth Festival

The first ever “Earth Festival,” which took place in Centennial Park, Sydney on November 29th, 2008, “[aimed] to generate environmental awareness using the universal language of art as a catalyst for individuals, communities and leaders to focus on environmental values” (Earth Festival 2008). Several art exhibits, craft stations, and activities took place throughout the festival, bringing people from around Australia together in the mutual appreciation of arts and the natural environment. Sculptor Guyzo Gibson uses large salvaged pieces of wood from old logging sites to make his work which was a highlight of the festival. In his work, Gibson “illuminates our cultured view of the forests in a stunning display that ingeniously emphasizes the purpose of preservation through art made from tree stumps and debris painstakingly dug from the ground, resurrected, cherished, honoured and returned with vision to a new and potent value” (The Nature of Wood 2008). Festival director, Paul von Bergen believes that this festival “*can lead the march to inspiring change by encouraging a connection with and an appreciation of the beauty of nature rather than fear-mongering about the threats being posed to our natural environment*”. He adds that, “*Art touches people’s hearts by expressing the beauty of nature and this is what the festival is all about*” (11/13/08).

Riverfestival

Further North, another festival using art to encourage learning about environmental and sustainability issues is Brisbane’s *Riverfestival*. This event, which takes place from around August 29 to September 7 every year, brings people from around Brisbane and beyond to celebrate the beauty and importance of the Brisbane River. A highlight event of the festival in 2008 was the creation and installation of a series of visual art projects entitled *Out of the River...imagine*. These projects were inspired by environmental issues, particularly pollution of the river by plastic bags, plastic bottles and bread tags, that have had a significant effect on the

well-being of the river. *350 plastic bags... imagine* brought Brisbane school students together with artist Tony Rice to carry out a project in which 350 plastic bags (the amount that are cleared from Brisbane River every week by the Healthy Waterways Clean Up crew) were turned into kites flying from the Goodwill Bridge and Cultural Forecourt at South Bank. In *700 plastic bottles... imagine*, Brisbane artists Julie Hannitz and Bronwyn Fields transformed 700 plastic bottles (also the amount cleared from Brisbane River every week) into chandeliers and a sculptural wall piece. Brisbane's Shailer Park State School "captured the imagination of Brisbane residents when they launched a community campaign to collect one million bread tags [from Brisbane River]" (amazingly, the amount cleared from the river every week) and turn them into a unique sculpture spanning the Victoria Bridge. (*Riverfestival* 2008) In this way, the festival brought together hundreds of local residents to actively address mutual concerns about the river's well-being and present their collaborative works to the broader community. In 2007, *Riverfestival* sponsored an initiative with similar intentions called "Kids on Water" through the goa Billboard Competition, in which students from 12 Brisbane Primary Schools were encouraged to address issues of water conservation and pollution through art. Local City Councilors picked winning pieces from every school which were then shown on a goa Billboard in each respective school area. "As well as giving the kids a unique opportunity to have their art displayed to the community, this competition also [provided] a chance for our city to see the change its children want in their world" (*Riverfestival* 2007). These art initiatives of *Riverfestival* thus play an important role in promoting community learning about environmental and sustainability issues in Australia.

5.4 Media Projects Utilizing Art to Address Environmental and Sustainability Issues

This section addresses how a media project in Australia has taken advantage of art as a means of communicating environmental and sustainability concerns.

Yarra Trams' Green Trams

Melbourne's Yarra Trams organization has recently installed a media project using photographs of various wildlife species to carry messages of environmental sustainability to people riding the trams, simultaneously promoting the sustainability of the tram service. These images of tigers, snow leopards, platypi, helmeted honeyeaters, rhinoceroses, and other wildlife species are displayed in "Green Trams" throughout the city, encouraging water and energy

conservation, consciousness about pollution, and the importance of using renewable energy sources. This project, which has been installed in many of the city's trams, evolved out of collaboration between Zoos Victoria, the City of Melbourne, and Yarra Trams. Through the use of art, these organizations hope to raise awareness about environmental and sustainability issues affecting not only humans but also other wildlife. (Yarra Trams 2008)

5.5 Effectiveness of Art in Communicating Environmental and Sustainability Issues

This section provides interviewees' responses to the question of how art is more or less effective than other means of communicating concerns about the environment and sustainability.

Sam Leach: *It's a lot less effective than literary communication or even spoken word (like broadcasts). Here you can just express facts and give people information straight up. This is a very effective way of raising awareness and presenting people with new information but I think art can be effective once people have got that information to think about what they know in new and productive ways. I think the best thing that art can do is connect disparate ideas together or give people a different perspective on something that they already know. (11/10/08)*

Geraldine Barlow: *Art can act as a lens into these issues but there is also this sense that art can seduce people with beauty. Art can inspire imagination and be a very compelling force in that way but this also makes it quite abstract, affecting people on an individual level. A lot of writing about how art works seems to refer to one way of understanding art: this is how it might work for other people but really this is just how art works for me. I feel that art can be deeply connecting; you can stand and look at a piece for a long time and connect with it on many different levels but you are also probably having a completely different experience from the person standing right next to you. (11/12/08)*

Kyla MacFarlane: *The freedom of art to tend to many things at once and connect ideas from many places is important: the fact that it does not necessarily have to address a certain cause but can simply create a thing of beauty. (11/12/08)*

Paul von Bergen: *The problem with logical, scientific approaches to informing people about these issues is that the information goes in one ear and out the other, whereas art communicates with people on an emotional level. This sense of feeling is more poignant and ever-lasting. (11/13/08)*

Mary Jean: *Art is a good way to give the message about these issues because people simply view it and don't have to do anything extra. Art is less aggressive than other forms of communicating these issues.* (11/13/08)

Andrew Hazewinkel: *Art can confirm how an individual may be feeling about their sense of power and being in the world. I think it speaks to people's subconscious in a poetic way about possibilities. My work, "Turbulence," focuses on something that is repulsive [old plastic bottles and soccer balls crashing around in the Tiber River in Rome] but also captivating in its presentation. The thing that is significant about this piece is that the subject matter is something that everyone can relate to. We all have used a plastic bottle or a soccer ball at one point or another, therefore the viewing of this film creates a common thread between people viewing it.* (11/13/08)

Elizabeth Milsom: *Often people take things for granted. Art can highlight important issues and help people see these issues in a new light.* (11/14/08)

Isabel O'Brien: *Art can be abstract. People have to think about it when they look at it and this encourages them to develop a relationship with the subject matter.* (11/14/08)

Mandy Martin: *Unexpected, left of field, lateral, non-verbal communication can work where other methods fail because of their technicality, weight of delivery and so on. These other methods can slip in under the radar as it were.* (11/15/08)

Ken Yonetani: *Not more or less effective than other ways of communicating but different. When people see art, they not only observe it, they interact with it (they may even eat it, in the case of the Fumi Tiles piece). These days the world is very rationalized and scientific. People need to see issues in a different light. Morris Burman, who wrote "The Enchantment of the World," describes how the world used to be very enchanted but we are becoming disenchanted as the great philosophies die out and our environment is collapsing. Indigenous tribes around the world still maintain this enchantment somewhat. The Aborigines and Native Americans have very environmentally friendly philosophies. I think art can uphold these philosophies to an extent.* (11/16/08)

Bonita Ely: *When you take art out of the equation, it gets to be very dry and boring and uninspiring. That poetic dimension isn't there that appeals to people's emotional motivation. Art gets people talking and makes people more aware of the philosophical dimensions of the problems. I'll give an example: one of my colleagues, Allan Giddy, used a well in Ireland to set*

up a telecommunications device that communicated with a similar well in the rocks in Sydney. People in Sydney could actually talk to people in Ireland. This kind of communication makes us sort of feel that we are citizens of the earth – that the planet is something that we all own. I think art really gives people images that inspire and humor, adding in the juice to help us get motivated. Whereas literature and television are distant, art is very direct and it can provide people with a corporeal connection to these issues. (11/16/08)

Tony Lloyd: *Artists do like to tackle important subjects like the environment and insightful curators can assemble thought provoking exhibitions that raise public awareness about issues but I really don't think that art is the right forum for informing the public about anything other than art. Art is willfully obscure. It revels in paradoxes and usually avoids definitive meaning. It is not a platform from which information about practical matters can be effectively disseminated. (11/19/08)*

Cameron Robbins: *Art has always been a fringe activity and is probably viewed as marginal and quirky by a very large percentage of the population. I think television ads are the most effective way of communicating issues directly. Art tends to go in so many directions that it demands a lot of a viewer's time and energy. (11/20/08)*

Bruce Alden: *Art tells stories and speaks to people in many different ways at once. People learn in many different ways: some visually, some aurally and some kinesthetically. Art can communicate environmental issues in many ways so that everybody can learn and grasp the issues. Also, art influences people subliminally. By even just seeing it out of the corner of their eyes, art is absorbed into peoples' consciousness. (11/22/08)*

Chris Bond: *I think that the relatively small audience that currently exists for contemporary art doesn't need much convincing when it comes to these issues. The hard part is reaching a larger audience that does need convincing. I don't think that art can effectively do this at this point in time. I think that the world of consumerism offers the greatest scope for exacting change. Making people aware of the environmental implications of the products that they choose to buy (whether the negative environmental effect is embedded in the manufacturing, use, or disposal of the product) could be very effective (it's worked on me!). (11/24/08)*

Allan Giddy: *Art is passive. It doesn't demand time of the viewer but if the viewer wants, he can walk around and look deeply into a piece. In this way, people can take more from art. The disadvantage to art is that it cannot present as much information to as large an audience as, say,*

television or movies but good art crosses linguistic and cultural borders. In this way, art can communicate between people across cultures and around the world. (11/26/08)

5.6 Creation of Art Piece

During the culmination of this study, I created an art piece which I call “The Carbon Sink.” This piece was constructed from a dead stump of a Camphorlaural tree, a sink and stacks of newspaper found at the Myocum Tip Waste Disposal Site. In making the piece, I was addressing issues of deforestation and climate change, the effects of which I have seen while traveling around the country with the S.I.T. program. My original intention in making the piece was to display it in Railway Square Park, Byron Bay and survey people viewing it to determine their opinions and the effectiveness of the piece in informing people about these issues. I planned to include a description of the work and suggestions of ways individuals could help to reduce the detrimental effects of deforestation and climate change along with the piece. Unfortunately, I was not given approval by the Byron Shire Council to set up the piece in the park because I was not able to supply a structural engineer’s report for it. In an attempt to bring the piece to the public’s attention, I contacted the local newspaper, the Byron Shire *Echo*, and told them my story in hopes that they might relay it to readers. Also, I suggested that I wanted to donate the piece to an individual or organization upon my departure from Australia. Hopefully, this story will be included in the next issue of the *Echo*. In my opinion, this piece was a success but its potential as an educational and inspirational tool was limited by the Council’s ruling.



Me with
The Carbon Sink (2008)

6. Discussion

This study has highlighted many ways that art can inform the public about environmental and sustainability issues. Direct conversations with artists have emphasized that art generally can affect socio-cultural or political change. Many of these artists also think that their work might be able to do this but because of the abstract nature of art and the complex, varied ways that people can interpret it, there is no definite, quantitative way of observing and recording how art actually affects change in individual and community behaviors or attitudes.

6.1 *The Relationship between Art and Viewer*

The question of how people relate to art is at the core of this discussion about the utility of art in informing the public and affecting change in habits and societal traditions towards environmental and sustainability issues. Every artist, art critic, and viewer relates to art in a different way – this was made evident by the variety of answers given in interviews and in the surveys about “The Ecologies Project” exhibit. But there seem to be several trends in the way that people understand art. One of the more consistent trends presented in this study is that, different from literature, television and radio broadcasts, art can communicate with individuals and communities on a poetic, emotional level, connecting with people’s consciousness subliminally. Also, art is generally passive in terms of what it requires of a viewer – there is not the “weight of delivery,” as Mandy Martin puts it, inherent in most other forms of communication so a viewer may be more willing to accept what is being communicated through art. Some see this passiveness as a shortcoming in art’s ability to effectively inform people about certain issues. Despite the fact that an artwork may be able to tend to many different ideas at once, it seems to be limited, in comparison to literature, television, movies and radio broadcasts, in the amount of information about each idea it can express and to how many people it can communicate these ideas. Several of the people interviewed in this study pointed to the general obscurity and ambiguity of art as a main reason for this limitation. Ultimately, this discussion gets down to the role of the viewer in maintaining and strengthening art’s significance. Artist Sam Leach believes that *“the only effective way for [art to educate people] would be if people found something in an artwork interesting enough to prompt them to do even a small amount of research to help themselves learn something new”* (Sam Leach 11/10/08). Although the relationship between a viewer and a work of art is generally passive, the viewer may get more

out of a piece by taking the initiative to act on what that work inspires within them. For this reason, the effectiveness of art to inform people about environmental and sustainability concerns is dependent not only on the artwork but more significantly on the viewer.

6.2 Art's Role in Promoting Sustainable Development

Allan Giddy's comment that "*good art crosses linguistic and cultural borders*" points to the particular usefulness of art in today's globalized society in addressing environmental and sustainability issues. As many countries around the world approach energy crises because of their dependence on rapidly diminishing oil supplies, there is a growing need for alternative, sustainable energy. Giddy's independent work and his work with the ERIA draws attention to sustainable energy and lighting technologies by creating working examples of these technologies through art. (Allan Giddy 11/26/08) It is possible then, that through similar work, communities around the world could become acquainted with the technologies they need to develop more sustainably. James Killian provides an interesting perspective on this point of discussion in an essay he wrote for the book Approaching the Benign Environment. Killian writes, "the insights of the artist, and the reenthronement of art in our life, can serve as vital guides and guardians of the objectives of progress" (Fuller, Killian & Walker 1970, p. 146). In many of the projects presented in this study, art has been the vehicle for a critical reevaluation of human progress. In both the *Special Forever* project (which resulted in River Dreams) and *Riverfestival's* "Kids on Water" competition, children were given the opportunity to express their feelings about the human-nature relationship. In doing so, these young artists emphasized what they appreciated and wanted to stay the same and what they wanted to see change. This creative approach to looking at nature and development is important in solidifying society's understanding about sustainable development. Many of the artists included in this study seem to highlight the benefits and detriments related with human progress. In doing this, these artists may play a significant role in guiding such progress as they encourage critical reevaluation of human development and its impact on the natural environment.

6.3 Community Involvement with the Arts

Killian makes it clear that "artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation but breathe a common air, and catch

light and heat from each other's thoughts" (Fuller, Killian & Walker 1970, pp. 159-160). The community arts projects and initiatives included in this study are proof of the truth in Killian's statement. In the book Art and Wellbeing, Paul Brown and Deborah Mills conclude that "creativity is inextricably linked to our wellbeing – people's lives are changed and communities and cultures are strengthened whenever imagination is encouraged" (2004, p. 2) In nearly all of the cases highlighted in this study, the creation of art has brought communities together to engage in various forms of discussion about behaviors and attitudes towards the environment and/or sustainability. Also, many of the projects and initiatives inspired a renewed appreciation for nature within these communities. It is thus clear that the arts play a particularly significant role in influencing the attitudes and developing the knowledge that individuals and communities need in order to re-think the position of humans in nature and to take action on environmental and sustainability concerns.

6.4 Broader Implications of the Study

Several studies in the past have focused on the importance of community arts in addressing mutual concerns about the environment and sustainability including Brown and Mills's study of *Murray River Story* and David Curtis's "Creating Inspiration: How the visual and performing arts shape environmental behavior." But by including an examination of contemporary gallery art, public (or site) art and festival art projects, this study has much broader importance in terms of how the Australian art movement as a whole is addressing environmental and sustainability issues. In addition, by communicating the intentions of the study to artists, exhibit curators and festival and organization directors, the study has become more than simply an examination of art's role in addressing these issues; it has become a channel of communication through which these ideas have begun to circulate on a wider scale between artists, community organizations and people of all walks of life. Hopefully, this might contribute to an increased appreciation of art, the environment and sense of community, all of which are strongly intertwined. This study may provide the groundwork for future proposals of community art projects and initiatives.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Art and the Human-Nature Relationship

Throughout human history, art has responded to and been inspired by the complex relationships between humans and nature. Aboriginal artists who used the natural environment both as material and inspiration for their art communicated these relationships across time through rock art dating back thousands of years. In a similar way, the Earthworks of several artists during the 1970s emphasized human relationships with nature on a large scale, presenting these themes to the general public through literature and the media. Many other artists throughout the latter half of the 20th century worked with groups of people on projects inspired by man's impact on the natural environment, often creating works that contributed to beautification of the land. These artists began to establish art as an important social tool for bringing people together to address man's relationship with nature. Their work has become known around the world through literature, film and the media as well, influencing the current art movement.

7.2 Art's Role in Addressing Environmental and Sustainability Issues

This study has looked at how art in Australia is addressing similar environmental and sustainability issues. Many contemporary artists whose work is shown in galleries throughout the country address their concerns through art, hoping to inspire within viewers a shared sense of appreciation for nature and consciousness about man's relationship with the land and natural resources. Outside of the gallery, some artists attempt to share these concerns through public art installations, generally communicating with people in passive, subliminal ways. On an even larger scale, several festivals and organizations initiated art projects that brought communities together to address common environmental and sustainability issues through creative engagement and collaboration, promoting a more developed understanding of the issues at hand. In addition, art has been used by government organizations to encourage greater consideration of environmental and sustainability concerns through public media messages. These examples show that art can assist in informing people about issues and bringing about change in behaviors and attitudes towards the environment and sustainability. As many of the interviews included in this study illustrate though, art can be limited in the extent of its communication and its educational and inspirational potential for many reasons. The challenge for artists and those involved with creative art projects is if they wish to effectively inform the public about environmental and

sustainability issues is to present art in the right forum and style that many people can engage with it and be inspired enough to act upon the themes it presents.

7.3 Management Recommendations and Recommendations for Further Study

In addressing such a wide-ranging topic with so many different definitions and manifestations as art, it can be difficult to gather data on a specific topic such as this study attempted to do. Thus, it is important when gathering background information to first determine the extent of information a source may provide. Throughout this study I came across hundreds of potentially useful examples of how art in Australia was addressing environmental and sustainability issues but I could not or did not see benefit in pursuing most of these because of logistical constraints, a lack of necessary contacts and/or lots of unrelated material. If surveying, it is important to know that there will actually be people to conduct the survey with. This was a lesson I learned the hard way in attempting to conduct a survey for this study. Also, when carrying out a study such as this one, case material can be quite sporadic and opportunities to advance the study can come up anywhere at any time. It is important to pursue such opportunities almost instantaneously: new events and exhibits open daily, often with very little advertisement, so staying aware and keeping an open mind is helpful in performing a successful, all-encompassing study. Due to the fact that the topic of this study is constantly evolving, there are many possibilities for future study. By simply conducting the same study in several months or years I am sure that a wealth of new significant findings could be made. Also, this type of longitudinal study would fulfill the current study goals in a different way by providing insights into how artist's philosophies have changed in conjunction with new findings about environmental and sustainability issues. Additionally, examining the evolution over time of community art projects would provide substantial conclusions to how effective art really is at informing people about certain issues and its ability to affect change in their behaviors and attitudes. An in-depth study into just one of these community organizations or one artist might also prove to be valuable.

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