

The Kyoto Proposal: eco-art and a form of conflict

DAVID HALEY,
MIRIAD,
Faculty of Art and Design,
Manchester Metropolitan University, d.haley@mmu.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper combines three presentations made between January and March 2003. The first was written for the Private View of River Life 3000: a dialogue for the beginning of time, at Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery. Delivered on 31 January, the eve of the Chinese New Year, this was a thank you address to fellow collaborators on making an installation, an exhibition and a community of enquiry. The second, Reflections on water: diverse definitions of art and ecology, was presented at the 3rd World Water Forum Stakeholder Centre, on 21 March as the US/UK Coalition embarked on war with Iraq. The third presentation, In the flow of time: a case study of ecological arts practice as research, was made the following day at the Honen-in Buddhist Temple, to an international arts audience.

The basic elements of the presentations were art, water and ecology and the underlying theme was an exploration of the relationship between humankind and climate change. This was illustrated by an audio visual narrative of the Shrewsbury based River Severn project. Definitions of 'eco-art' and 'dialogue' established a common understanding of the content, form and process of eco-arts practice. The definitions also make the argument for an eco-centric culture and propose that may be achieved through an understanding of aesthetic diversity. Drawn from time, place and circumstance, this paper will present The Kyoto Proposal: eco-art and a form of conflict.

Context

Once the Imperial Capital of Japan, Kyoto may still claim to be the country's spiritual and cultural centre. As well as world renowned images of temples, Zen gardens and Geisha, Kyoto has become closely associated with the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention Climate Change and the 1997 Protocol to ratify, accept and approve it by member nations. Kyoto was, therefore, an entirely appropriate setting for the 2003 3rd World Water Forum.

Following the disappointing 2002 Johannesburg Earth Summit, which at least recognised the importance of water, Kyoto promised to reinforce global action on water security. Among the most significant developments to take place between the second and third World Water Forums, and between Johannesburg and Kyoto was the introduction of both 'inclusion' and art as integral elements to the proceedings and to the understanding of the earth's environmental situation.

Perhaps the New York Times was correct? In its only coverage of the 2002 Earth Summit (after the event) it laid the blame for the greens' lack of success on their inability to make their message 'sexy' – how could their efforts compete with the billions of dollars spent on marketing the world's most powerful corporations? The 1992 Rio Summit, with its unclear definitions of sustainable development, certainly missed the opportunity to include art or culture in the tenets (economic, environmental, social) of Agenda 21.

Reflections on water: diverse definitions of art and ecology

The Third World Water Forum did initiate the Virtual Water Forum, a process of information gathering that targeted the participation and attendance of otherwise excluded people and

communities, thus expanding the notion of 'stakeholder'. Another addition was that of an integrated Arts Festival. Although Israeli eco-artist, Shai Zakai had been included in her government's delegation to Johannesburg, that event did not recognise art per se. Kyoto, however, included presentations from both Zakai and myself as eco-artist stakeholders and held many performance and visual arts events dedicated to the interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon of water – illustrating the inseparable role of nature and art in Japanese culture.

In the flow of time: a case study of ecological arts practice as research

Another 3rd World Water Forum event was the Anglo/Japanese arts seminar organised by Crossover UK. This was held at the Honen-in Temple and included the temple's Buddhist priest who presented further connections between nature, art and water. 'In the flow of time...' made the distinction between ecological arts practice and the illustrative and interpretative water focused works of the other artists. The use of formal research questions and the development of a dialogical methodology were shown to be key to ecological arts practice.

River Life 3000: a dialogue for the beginning of time

In addition to acknowledging the contribution made by many people to the exhibition, this presentation was an interim case study of the programme of ecological art. Commissioned by the Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, the programme of projects that started by questioning the UK Environment Agency's Report for a Flood Defence Strategy for Shrewsbury had produced some encouraging outcomes. These included:

three-year Arts Council of England funding for an arts mentoring scheme to explore the effects of Climate Change in the County of Shropshire

a Living River Archive to continue to contribute local comments the Museum's collection

a River Life tour of the exhibition to communities along the full length of the River Severn.

However, riparian development has increased as the local authority and the town's Traders' Association recognise the commercial value of their river. So, despite the support River Life 3000 afforded the Borough's Countryside Unit in reforestation and the Sustainability Officer in her promotion of biodiversity and renewable resources, the Planning Department has escalated its floodplain building programme. Indeed much of the new construction work has been of Council buildings sited on low-cost, high flood risk land that is now protected by the new flood defences.

The Proposal

Our Western culture demands that urban development is a given strategy for the furtherance of our increasing species and the solution to all social and economic problems – that categorised as non-urban being placed at the disposal of the urban for leisure and food production, thus denying the value of biodiversity and rural life. A more viable and sustainable strategy may be offered through arts practices that contribute to the understanding of diverse aesthetics and the development of an eco-centric culture. It may, also, offer a ways of mediating and even resolving some of the conflicts between nature and culture.

The Form of Conflict

Realised through the research for and making of the installation River Life 3000, certain elements became metaphorically significant. The recognition of these conceptual/visual metaphors, in turn, suggested patterns of understanding that were expressed in proposals for further creative interventions in urban planning and culture. The driving metaphor to emerge was that of 'culture as a container'.

The defensive loop of the River Severn, in which Shrewsbury is contained, is a physical manifestation of its cultural identity (a mirror image may be seen in the map of Baghdad). Living in relative harmony with its river, Shrewsbury changed little from its medieval founding to the late 18th century. The seasonal rhythm of the river provided abundant salmon, transport for trade and fertile floods for rich meadows and pastures. However, as building and industry overflowed on to the floodplain, so the town found itself in conflict with the river's flood-form eco-system. The new flood defences may, therefore, be seen as a vain attempt to contain the river.

The image of the town as cultural container was echoed in the installation's central object, a clepsydra (Gk - water thief), or water clock. From Ancient Egypt to Greece its development represented the first attempts to calibrate the day into regular hours, breaking seasonal shifts of daytime and nighttime. In the installation, each amplified droplet that escaped to an inadequately sized font below prompted a moment of reflection on the temporal state of all human endeavour – again, a cultural container in conflict with natural rhythms and order.

The paper will expand on these and several more examples to draw our attention to the pros and cons of cultural containers as models of urban design. It will further develop the argument for an eco-centric culture based on aesthetic diversity and present this as an integral strategy for social inclusion. The paper, finally, questions the appropriation of the container metaphor as a desirable cultural form – by whom, how and into what are we to be included?