

Art and Climate Change

Separate Bubbles or Mutual Membrane?

by Mario Petrucci

We might need to go back a step. There are, at the very least, three factors in contemporary society that prevent the emergence of a fully creative human consciousness that is in harmony with ecology. These three factors, both directly and indirectly, accelerate climate change, favour global inequality over fairness, and seed alienation rather than togetherness. They are: bad ‘memes’, ‘Radical Inertia’, and ‘Framed Questions’.

First, a meme is a self-replicating unit – a recurring splinter – of culture. The term was coined by British evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, to describe the gene-like behaviour of cultural fragments, propagating from generation to generation, often mutating as they go. Think of a famous folk melody, a TV catchphrase, or a political idea that makes a neat headline. In fact, the idea of a meme is probably itself a meme. I don’t completely believe in the cogency of the concept, nor in the absolute explanatory capability of memes; but when I look at how assumptions, values, and behaviours concerning climate change are perpetuated against the tide of data that calls for urgent action, the notion of the ‘bad meme’ does seem a useful partial idea.

Next, Radical Inertia describes a profound resistance to change. This is encountered when a particular way of doing, or seeing, things is rooted deeply within us – not just ideas, but infrastructure, laws, customs, and so on. We’d come up hard against Radical Inertia if we tried to abolish the use of fossil fuels, say, or TV. Any such inertia is ‘radical’ when alternatives are barely considered and/or have become practically impossible to implement within existing systems.

Finally, Framed Questions are questions with an agenda, posed so that only certain ‘answers’ are possible. ‘Shall we reserve 0.1% or 0.2% of GDP for sustainability?’ That’s a Framed Question. They happen in politics and art because so many of our assumptions are largely invisible to us, such as the idea that economic growth is *always* good.

In fact, the long-standing pursuit of global economic growth provides an example of a major non-sustainable human endeavour that interweaves all three problems into deep intractability. Perpetual economic growth is itself perpetuated by socio-economic and political memes that have been welded into our norms of discourse. The enterprise has accrued immense Radical Inertia through established thinking and practice, and it is mostly examined via Framed Questions that discuss, say, its desirable rate rather than its actual validity. Economic growth has faced some validated challenges of late from alternative thinkers, but it persists more or less intact in many quarters nonetheless.

The transformational potential of art

So, what can art do about this three-legged stool of trouble? Well, by heightening our awareness of the detailed texture of perception, by revealing private and collective thinking, by making the habitual and familiar unfamiliar – that is, through ‘defamiliarisation’ – great art can saw through all three legs on which denial and unsustainability squatly sit.

Art possesses an eternal ability to transform us. Transformation dents Radical Inertia. As poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in *The Ninth Elegy*: ‘What is your most pressing injunction, if

not for transformation?’ One reasonably expects some of our art, at least, to have transformative potential stored in its DNA. More to the point, I hope we can all recall a poem or canvas, a sculpture or film, that opened us to wider truths, that revealed our selves to ourselves, or facilitated a breaking up of a Framed Question, however tangentially. William Wordsworth’s daffodils do that for me, asserting the near-limitless ‘wealth’ of natural beauty and its independent and self-sustaining value in the face of any Framed Questions around land use.

Great art, whether experimental or not, indeed challenges the dominant ideology simply by being what it is, and it often stimulates radical shifts in perspective, cracking Framed Questions open with its forensic, interrogating insights and its plural/fluxile trajectories through mind and heart. Meanwhile, art can also nurture empathy and sensitivity, qualities that are essential to eco-justice.

What’s more, good art can be meme-proof because it can’t be pinned down to one-eyed meanings, that charge of the Cyclops herd. It operates on several levels at once, across apparent boundaries and hermetic dimensions. Australian poet, Les Murray, said: ‘Only poetry recognises and maintains the centrality of absolutely everywhere.’ Maybe poetry, and art more generally, is a way to generate Federico García Lorca’s ‘Green wind’ that eventually makes contact, all to all. Not only that; genuine art is a kind of ‘what if?’ It encourages us, indeed can train us, through its ‘what ifs’, to recreate ourselves, to re-engender our world, to recognise patterns – even those habits in ourselves we might prefer initially not to look at – and to shift them. Great art deflates denial. Great art, if we let it, reboots consciousness.

Towards Eco-Art?

But art can be part of the disease too. Remember all that awful pro-war verse of the First World War. So, is my wish-list for art, as outlined above, met by the avant-garde? Perhaps, but not necessarily. What I’m really indicating, maybe, is art that possesses a radical but also authentic intent, or that observes so intimately and sensitively that we’re profoundly changed by it. Art that pierces. Art that can ramify, into the culture, the integrity and insight of any individual – including, dear reader, you – who is still, in some way, more fully awake, more completely connected.

Any art that does this (whether or not it is also avant-garde) becomes, by association, ‘eco-art’ – or at least a close cousin to it – because without these motivations, mobilisations, and re-awakenings of the human spirit we remain individually trapped in ourselves as we are, in our seemingly separate and disconnected selves, whilst being blown along collectively by the myriad systems of unsustainability, oppression, and deadness that our culture has invested so much in for so long.

You ask: Is such eco-art on the rise? Well, it depends where you look. Rather than point the finger, though, let me instead reaffirm this: Clearly, we need to find, from somewhere, the capacity and generosity for deep-moving change that leads us to greater harmony-humility with respect to climate change and ecology. First and foremost, in this, one is helped by having rich and actual relationships with the environment: we can’t all just read about it in sealed workplaces and tower blocks. But looking and naming are fundamental aspects of involved human experience, too. So, art and poetry can contribute something powerful and important to ‘being in an environment’, perhaps a seed-crystal for a much wider cognitive recrystallisation.

A suggestion, then. When you read a poem or look at an artwork, ask yourself: Is the art/poetry I’m experiencing a part of the modern cultural wound, or party to its healing? Is it perpetuating unhelpful memes that drive climate change and injustice, especially those quiet assumptions I might not immediately register? And that’s not just about ‘content’ or what the

artwork is on its surface. It's also about the taproots of visual and textual perception itself. Andy Goldsworthy might be a good example of an artist successfully exploring such areas. He uses natural materials to create artworks that reify transience, that reconnect us to local environments and natural events in powerfully memorable ways. His goal is to experience and understand landscape more fully than as mere resource. He tells us: 'we are nature'.

The question of art's influence

On the other hand, the famed poet Auden famously stated: *Poetry makes nothing happen*. That phrase of his is too often used to suggest that poetry or, by implication, art more generally is, at heart, ineffectual and impractical. But, later in the same poem, Auden writes: 'With your unconstraining voice/ Still persuade us to rejoice.' That's a clue, I think, to how we might re-read the preceding phrase. Perhaps the message here is not: Poetry makes *nothing happen*, but: Poetry does not *make* anything happen. So, poetry doesn't force, cajole or constrain; it persuades. It guides us to openings, possibilities, and ultimately to that empowering 'nothing' which occasionally suggests itself, tangibly, beyond content – rather like the carrier wave in a radio signal.

The artistic and cognitive (and therefore, in time, practical) transformative potential of this fresh 'carrier wave' is not to be underestimated. For example, a positively persuasive poem or artwork could offer a partial antidote to the brutal futuristic visions we're mostly exposed to, characterised by what we, in the near future, will have harrowingly and irreversibly lost. Such art might emphasise, instead, the eternal values we will in all likelihood retain, or even augment. That's one way in which the eco-poem – and eco-art more generally – can evade being another form of Framed Question, where the future is too often solely, and paralytically, framed by failure and fear. In 'Making Peace', the poet Denise Levertov writes:

*'The poets must give us
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar
imagination of disaster...'*

For 'poets', of course, read 'artists'. Levertov goes on to suggest that the mysterious, intelligently groping processes by which poems get written might also be the way to change warlike society. Perhaps this is what unsustainable institutions and cultures most need, at least initially: to embrace sustainable practices that are functional and negotiated, yes; but also to become capable of awarenesses and activities that have the quality of great art, that are open and sometimes mysterious, that are creatively, intelligently exploratory. How else can climate change be tackled inclusively?

That said, the extent to which most individuals – even if immersed in great art – can effect a genuine shift in themselves, let alone in our most ingrained collective assumptions and systems ... well, that's clearly a core issue circumscribing the role of art in social and political change. Even Marx himself couldn't foresee the mutating tenacity of capital-intensive processes and their associated ideologies. Our economic systems seem to have almost outgrown human intervention, getting more socially entrenched and personally invasive by the month. On the larger scale, look up 'TTIP' online and quake in your bindings at the kinds of economic intensification that were being seriously proposed. Not only that; it seems almost impossible to even recast or renegotiate our economic and political practices and alliances in any meaningful or urgent way, as recent climate change conferences amply show.

Meanwhile, advertising and its associated consumptions are now normalised on social media, stepping straight into our most private and personalised spaces. The problem here is that art, even if it stands against such things, generally isn't naturally a mass-communication form, partly because it operates on individuals so differently – which is part of its inherent strength.

And it doesn't seem the norm, quite yet, for the masses to use challenging art as the main way of re-growing themselves!

Mutual mobilisation

However, I'm optimistic about what art can achieve in honest hands, eyes, and ears, particularly after what I've experienced in schools and colleges. It's not that art substitutes for, say, political lobbying or activism; but it can support the personal transformation that informs and motivates practical and ideological change. Most importantly, and this is a key point, I sense that we'll probably need humanity to overcome Radical Inertia *in ways that themselves imitate how ecology works*. In this, art could well turn out to be an essential 'species' in the deeply enmeshed and webby totality of what society is and how it manifests future self-inspections and self-alterations.

One might too easily assume that film or music are far more potent social 'carriers' of the eco-message than, say, poetry or gallery-based art, especially for younger people; but you never know where those knotholes of opportunity and change will be in the homogeneous planks of cultural wood. Just as business and materialist society tend to undervalue ecology (or, worse, attempt to reduce it to a market/marketable value), so, too, do they tend to undervalue anything, like art, that has kinship with ecology.

And yet, a single poem or artwork in the classroom or in the public domain can re-channel many lives. Such interventions may, at times, appear inconsequential; but they can act as constellating points for larger forces, or provide a way of discovering – or rediscovering – fresh ways of relating. After all, 'ecology' must have something to do with fundamental Relationship; i.e. it is the very basis of us even being here, along with all the biotic/abiotic contexts and relations that engender and support that being. So, let's be bold: with courage, imagination, and sensitivity, combinative large-scale cultural forms that involve reflective art can indeed make a fundamental difference to climate change and global justice.

Am I overly sanguine in this? Isn't art at the moment more concerned with the next wave of semi-celebrity artists and who they are, how important they are, rather than with the various messages we all might have to offer each other? Surely, contemporary art's role isn't just about generating more and more contemporary art? Is art flirting with celebrity culture, leading us – to frame my own question! – to something hyped, too business/sales-oriented, too concerned with entertainment? Is art implicated, like market economy, in the creation of winners and losers in an inward-looking and arbitrary cultural race rather than a generous and outwardly-oriented act of connection?

In answer, there are so many extraordinary artists and poets around who deserve greater public attention, and who would add something unique and challenging to what young people already receive in this debate. As I see it, an artist's duty – and my own very first duty – is also a gift: to grow in every way possible and to help others to do the same (in their own terms, not mine) through relationship; not to be merely best-selling, rhetorical, sensational, accessible, famous, entertaining, or 'right'. That duty, that gift, to reality and growth isn't imposed from without; it arises from the creative act of within-ness that art engages. Art, especially in its more serious and earnest concerns, has to do with its reflections on (and of) the tenuous and tenacious glow of Relationship. Art and climate change, art and eco-justice, needn't be separate bubbles; they can be a place of deep meeting and mutual mobilisation.

In many ways, not least ecologically, global society and its economic and political systems remain embroiled with damaging memes, Radical Inertia, and Framed Questions. Art can communicate with the public in ways that go far beyond the impact of scientific claims. We need the affective and cognitive power of art to challenge bad memes and Framed Questions, and to galvanise us against Radical Inertia. Time is short. But we have to hold our nerve. In

that larger, most crucial enterprise of collaborative transformation towards ecological and socio-economic balance, we must each cleave, as ecology itself does, to first principles: Art, and the artist, need to be first encouraged to be fully aware and alert – to be utterly, reflectively themselves – if they are to help catalyse something ‘important’ or ‘else’.

To illustrate the above essay, an example of a new, potentially impactful genre follows: ‘Eco-sci-fi flash fiction’.

RAIN

‘Could such a place really exist, mudda?’

‘In my inner sight, in dream, it exists, my little pebble. A place afloat with air, steeped in water.’

‘But we have to search so hard for air, mudda, in tiny pockets underground. You snuff it out for us, night to night. As for water, it’s a miracle to find a single drop to share between us, gleaned from the deepest lintel ...’

‘I’ve dreamed it, pebble. A place in another galaxy. A planet. A planet blue with air and water, swarming with creatures, tight with people. So many people – with air all around them, above them, within them, between them. Air taller than the rocks. And water. In dribbles across the dust, becoming streams and torrents, lakes and oceans too deep to wallow.’

‘That place is heaven, mudda.’

‘Yes, pebble. A heaven where water can even fall from the sky.’

‘No! From the sky?’

‘Yes. From the sky. So furiously, it collects in puddles the people joyously splash through.’

‘Oh let me dream that planet too, mudda.’

‘We’ll dream it together, pebble. Sleep. Here’s a drop of my water, a breath of my air, to last you through the night.’

‘Thank you, mudda. Will there be another drop, another breath, tomorrow?’

‘I hope so. May it please be so.’

‘Those people, mudda, in that blue planet. What would those people be like?’

‘I don’t know, pebble. But I reckon that with each breath they took, with each sip of water, they’d brim with gratitude. Yes, moment to moment, breath to breath, drop to drop – they’d be so very grateful.’

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*The published essay in **Anthroposphere: The Oxford Climate Review** included a photograph composed by environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy.*
