

ANTONY GORMLEY

ART IN THE TIME OF GLOBAL WARMING

Published in LONG HORIZONS: AN EXPLORATION OF ART + CLIMATE CHANGE, British Council, London, UK, February 2010

I have just driven through the Hatfield Tunnel. Above it are factory outlet shops that sell overproduced goods at reduced prices to bargain hunters. The tunnel is long and I imagine that the shops are plenty. These out-of-town malls are satellites of emergent in-town superstores, like the new Westfield at Shepherds Bush and the newer one that will be at Stratford East on the Olympic site. Art is similarly involved in a system of exchange and distribution that involves in-town and out-of-town franchises which might, as with the Guggenheim Museum in New York, first spread downtown, then to Bilbao, then to Berlin and finally to Abu Dhabi; or the Tate making outposts in Liverpool and St. Ives, then expanding itself into Bankside and now expanding again. Art has seemingly become enmeshed in the same processes of expansion and growth that have characterised late capitalism everywhere with its system of exchange, communication and distribution.

But of course this bland comparison does not really wash. Shops are there to satisfy inflated desires. Art galleries contain forms and experiences that inspire, question and extend human experience. Art is the way that life tests and expresses itself, without which we are already dead.

But what happens to your enthusiasm in belonging and contributing to this system of distribution when you are told that we have 96 months before we reach the tipping point whereby the feedback systems of man-made global warming take over probably resulting in 10s of millions of climate-change refugees displaced and homeless by the end of this century?

In facing the challenges of global climate crisis in a culture which encourages us to do more, produce more, be seen more - my initial response is paralysing fear, I want to shrink, to go into a hibernating state with minimum muscular effort and put minimal demand on any kind of fuel.

This position is not helpful but perhaps is a good place to start to rethink one's place in the world.

The carbon crisis calls for a re-examination of our faith in the technological basis of Western progress. A change in belief is a cultural change; art and artists are implicated. As Paul Ehrlich and others have pointed out human evolution has been driven by cultural rather than biological change; our brain size, synaptic activity, physical characteristics have not changed much in the last million or so years. What has changed has been the material culture that we have made and which has in turn made us, from stone tool making, language, farming, printing, the industrial revolution, the information revolution and now, maybe, the most critical and difficult revolution of all: a complete reversal of many of the values that we have held dear. We can no longer assume that more is better. We have to change our cultural heroes from generals and captains of industry to meditators and mediators, from Rambo and Terminator to Ghandi and the Dalai Lama.

Our tool systems, no longer stone, having separated us from the rest of the planet and biosphere, are now what will, without this revolution, destroy both. The notion that human life was going to be improved by an empirical march of tool making that would make life stronger, longer and safer is challenged by the fall out effects of this very technology. Technology that was in some senses made to make life better has now become the problem

But of course art is not technology, it is useless but vital ; it is through art that we communicate what it feels like to be alive. When you ask 'what is the point of art?' you could reformulate the question to 'what is the point of human beings?'

At the British Museum is a carving of two reindeer crafted from a mammoth tusk made 12 thousand years ago. The artist's depiction of the antlers pressed against the flanks of the female in front and stag at the rear, the winter markings of the coat and the rendering of the eyes are the result of acute observation and enormous empathy with the life of these animals. It was by following the seasonal migrations of reindeer that modern Europeans survived between ice-ages. When swimming across a glacial melt river the deer were easily hunted. The making of this object was an expression of connection, identification with the continuation of life, its interconnectivity both in sex and in death and by inference the human position within a chain of being.

What is the basis of art? There is a strong connection between the desire for survival and the art of a people and a time. We have a task in hand. Culture in the developed western world has always positioned itself in distinction to nature: now we have to discover our nature within nature.

A Constable cloud study at the V & A: a small sketch in oil and pigment on board, captures that most fleeting of things, the effect of sunlight on water vapour in our atmosphere. Here are ever changing forms that evoke time, space and the act of being itself, but also an invitation to empathise with the exchange systems in our atmosphere. Single dry brush strokes capture high cirrus against the thin cold high air while rotating brush strokes evoke the lower nimbus clouds that form hovering masses of white just above our heads. This sketch is another object that locates us within the scheme of things evoking our ability to engage in elemental exchanges.

I feel powerless, locked into a system and infrastructure that I cannot control, built on the basis on infinite growth that is unsustainable both in terms of demography and resources; people, air, water and food. How can I avoid making situations worse? How do I justify my life or indeed this culture as a whole? This was the problem keenly felt and left unsolved at the recent climate negotiations in Copenhagen. How can there be a consensus on resource use when half of the developing world wants to experience the same level of modern living as us and wants to undergo the last 300 years of Western development in a sixth of the time?

An over cast sky, a dark river and a distant town, a naked woman sits on the ground and suckles a baby under a stunted holm-oak , sheltered by bushes. Opposite her on a low brick plinth capped by stone rise two broken pillars. To the side and front of this altar a fully clothed man stands nonchalantly holding a staff in his right hand. He is smartly dressed with slashed breaches and a fine linen shirt with white and red leggings. He looks over to the naked woman, she looks at us. We are involved in this scene that is as engaging and enigmatic as when it was painted nearly half a millennium ago. Its Georgione's Tempest and hangs at the Academia in Venice. Here we are held by an atmosphere partly meteorological, partly psychological. Lightning is striking in the distance behind the town where the sky is blackest. The effect of the work envelops us in that moment in the

storm before the rain where the world and everything in it is waiting to change - continuity, future, life, love, nature, everything hangs in the balance.

Has our confidence in human continuity undermined our ability to make art at all? Art, certainly Western art, has been an expression of and dependent on confidence: confidence in a culture's lifestyle and in its continuity in the future. Now art undermines and investigates systems of power and, rather than projecting stable traditional values into the future, questions the viability of any kind of future at all. We have to re-evaluate the function of art within the frame of a sustainable lifestyle best exemplified by those societies that have had little technological advance.

Ever since Joseph Banks visited Tahiti and wrote in 1770 of the Tahitians:

. . . thus live these- I had almost said happy - people, content with little nay almost nothing. Far enough removed from the anxieties attending upon riches or even the possession of what we Europeans call common necessities. . .

From them appear how small are the real wants of human nature, which we Europeans have increased to an excess which would certainly appear incredible to these people could they be told it. Nor shall we cease to increase them as long as luxuries have been invented and riches found . . .

Rising sea levels are destroying the homelands of Kiribatti, Tuvalu and the Solomon islands (amongst others) as a result of too much CO2 in the atmosphere put there by us and yet they are furthest away from the benefits and excesses through which our industrialised world has enjoyed itself. Yeats said that it was suffering that transforms an intelligence into a soul but how many tornadoes in Tottenham or floods in Cumbria will it take to create a soul brave enough to change? It is a cruel fact that the people of Tuvalu are the ones who are suffering for our sins and they are too far away for their soul to have influence on our intelligence.

Is it possible to re-think art and take it from this finished-object status and make it into a verb, a participatory, open space, a place of transformation and the exchange of ideas and reflection on our state and status? Can we use art as a way of investigating this perilous time? Can we change from our obsession with production values? Instead of the perfection of an Asprey's catalogue or the gloss of the desirable branded object can we accept that art has to find its own raw and direct way of existing? It was great to see an old bleached-out photograph in a recent article on Boltanski - art needs to have its own genuine patina, communicating its journey into the world.

In the turbine hall at Tate Modern the light is strange, the air is thick, it is summer but cool. Adjusting to the orange, yellow, modern frequency light coming from a great disc in the ceiling, people are moving slowly. Some lie on the ground. I had a distant impression that there were bats hanging from the ceiling, they moved, black silhouettes scuttling. Looking carefully at the golden light source I realised it was a half disc pressed against a mirrored ceiling and that the mirror stretched the entire length of the turbine hall. The disk was mirrored so that it became circular and complete, we were mirrored, I was mirrored in the ceiling, these were not bats, they were us. Passing under the bridge I laid down amongst others who were in the picture on the ceiling: we could change it. I waved to myself, someone waved back. I was in a picture that was unfolding, I was inside an artificial world that was unfolding through and with us as participators. This was Olafur Eliasson's Weather Project at the Tate Modern in 2003.

I can think of many artists who can do this. Beuys and Smithson, Long and De Maria showed the way of direct working with site making a place to be in ways that art had only pictured before. Kounellis, by investigating the materials of trade across Europe continually in smell, texture and arrangement, underscores the relation between man and matter. Simon Starling investigates the subtle inversions and interdependencies of energy and made structures. Following the lead of Lothar Baumgarten, Francis Alys investigates the tribal relations of the city's forest floor dwellers and celebrates them. Cornelia Parker re-stages meteoric events asking how humans can participate in the telluric and teleological. All of these artists' work makes you feel more alive, more aware, both of the human predicament and of our material and elemental surroundings. There are more - so many more - that are using their lives to make balance between thought, matter and feeling in a way that has never existed before.

Last summer I was up in Scotland in a wood just west of the Pentland Hills and came upon a robust hut, its thick walls made of large lumps of the local dark igneous stone. It is slate roofed and there is a single door. Stepping in, down, and getting used to the low light entering from two unglazed windows from each gable end, I recognised that the floor was uneven and in the half light, that I am actually standing on bedrock. This surface revealed the surface of our earth, unadorned, bruised, cracked, wedged open by roots, smoothed by ice, pitted by water, laid by sedimentation. This revealing of the underneath of things, the hidden support that lies beneath trees, homes, buildings was both shocking and engaging. Here was a useless building in which we could encounter our dependency: a brilliant work by Andy Goldsworthy.

So what I am asking for is a re-assessment of what art is and how it works. I am questioning the linear trajectory of art history as part of the Western development of history recognising that all art exists in the sense of a continuous present. We are now in a position to acknowledge that those stages in an evolutionary past that would in previous times, have been thought of as primitive, are co-existing in this era and are not superseded - and actually the use of the fetish and the totem as reference points for a model of art are enormously useful.

How do I justify the work and life of this studio with its ten thousand square feet of heated space and 17 daily assistants? In the final analysis I do not have to justify what we do; this workshop is part of cultural evolution, part of an attempt to define my own belief systems and those of my colleagues. I can only hope that this is a creative community, a place where people can share skills, ideas and energy. I hope that it can be a fulcrum of change and exchange in which the idea of an inclusive culture can be born. We create here situations and objects that can become catalysts for a form of reflexivity that allows the viewing subject not simply to be a passive consumer of an already tested experience but for the experience of art itself to be testing ground for both the model of art and the model of the human subject. We have in making art a specialisation and its exchange as a matter of high monetary worth lost its central subject - the human being. In the art of the 20th century the Duchampian breakthrough was the examination of human labour and mass production in the 'found object'. I would like art to re-focus on the lost subject.

But it is also my responsibility to make sure that I can deal with my own impacts, including the carbon footprint of the studio and all its activities. . I have had the carbon footprint of the studio assessed, minimised my flights, the studio is insulated, and we will install solar panels on the roof (it is wide and relatively flat). We must recycle more of our materials and investigate the viability of a wind turbine. I must also decide whether carbon offsetting is a conscience salver or a real benefit.

Having done all of this my greatest responsibility is to make work in the most direct way that I can, and interpret this time and place in a way that makes people more aware of themselves and it.
